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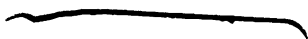
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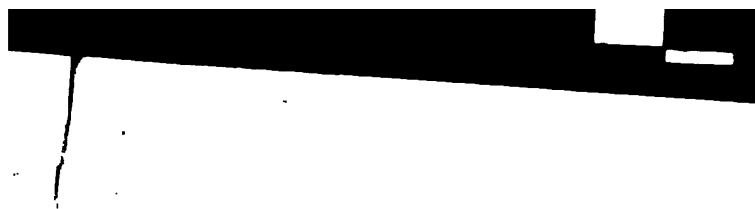
# Guardian

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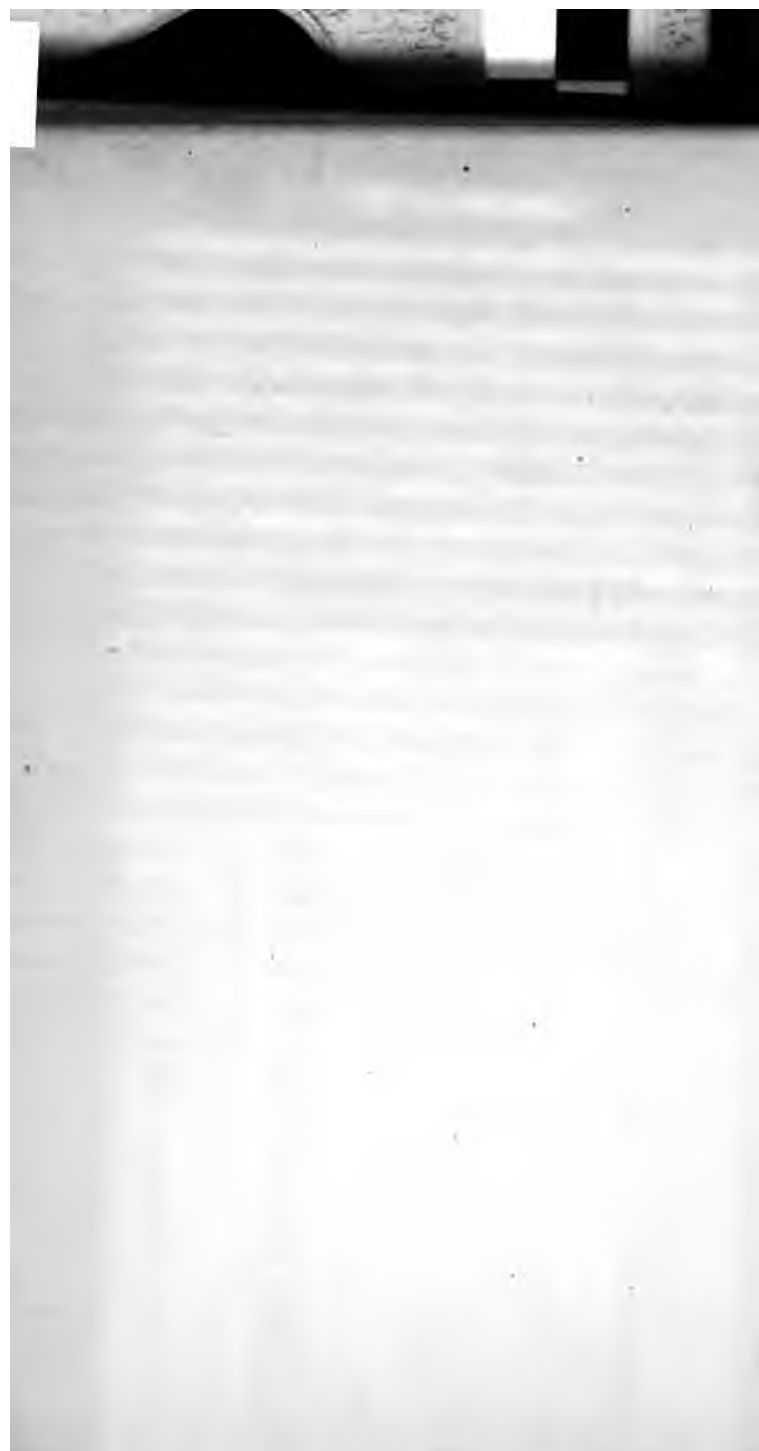
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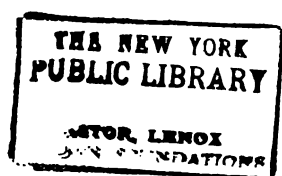






# THE GUARDIAN









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# THE GUARDIAN

BY

FREDERICK ORIN BARTLETT

*Author of "The Web of the Golden Spider," "The Seventh Noon," "The Prodigal Pro Tem," etc.*

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY

N. C. WYETH

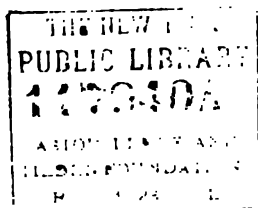


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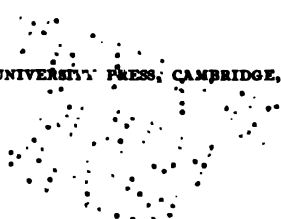



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To  
R. S. J.



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# THE GUARDIAN





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# *The Guardian*

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## CHAPTER I

### *The Christening*

**A**S wild as logs leaping clear of a broken jam, twenty lumbermen just off the spring drive jumped from the train as it pulled into Bangor and whooped their way across the platform. Tanned and bearded and hard as nails, they made as great a commotion as though there had been two hundred of them. For pent-up enthusiasm, for sheer animal spirits, for naked beef and brawn, they were in fact fully equal to that number of the putty-faced hosts who waited behind the swinging doors to receive them. For when you give men who are stalwart to begin with five months of mountain air, five months of monastic seclusion among the pines, five months of swinging an axe from dawn to twilight, and add to this a month of log-driving where an hourly shaking of dice with death makes men reckless, and finally fill their pockets with money and turn them loose in

even a Maine city, you have made a goodly company of savages.

Sanderson, a hairy giant in a gaudy Mackinaw jacket, led the group. His black hair was whitening at the temples, and though his eyes were as clear as a June morning the lusts that burned back of them were crimson-streaked. Behind him followed Big Ben and Stevens and Ladoux and Campbell and Trumbull, all hairy, all clear-eyed, all burning within. In the rear followed Pierre Bartineau and Nat Page, the youngster of the group. Though the latter equaled the best of them pound for pound and inch for inch, this was his first season. He stood six feet two, and his hair, blond as a Saxon's, needed cutting. Beneath this his blue-gray eyes stood out like crystal springs. He walked a bit stiffly, like a man with too much hard muscle. He lacked the eagerness of the others and lagged behind, for the hunger that burned within him did not lead to the swinging doors but on to St. Croix — on to St. Croix, where a wisp of a girl who would n't more than reach to his shoulders had smiled good-by to him a half-year before. That was all she had granted him — neither more nor less — just a smile at parting, but all winter long that had been enough to gladden the toil of the day. It was n't much, and the yearning which now grew out of that, as he stood

within fifty miles of those black eyes, might seem a weak thing compared to the hardy lusts which drove on his fellows. But consider this — it was mighty enough to control those lusts in him, who not only had more of red blood but more of youth than any man-son of the group. Call it moonshine if you will, but, chaste and temperate as the moon's white beams are, it is in them and not in sunshine that the big dreams are quickened which later are born in the heat of the day.

Bartineau lingered by his friend's side while the others moved on. Built like a giant dwarf — short of stature but broad across the shoulders and deep of chest — he considered Nat Page the finest man on earth. He had thought so ever since the smallpox struck camp last winter, for he might have died then and there, like a rat in a hole, had it not been for Page. His other comrades would willingly have plunged among the grinding ice-blocks on the river to save him from drowning; they would have battled with the twisting, writhing logs to save him or any other of their fellows from that mauling watery death, but when it came to the smallpox — *Sacré Dieu*, that was another matter. This took a different kind of courage, and only the youngster of the group had proved himself big enough for that.

"Son," pleaded Bartineau, who was ten years the

other's senior, "take me home with you. Nom de Dieu — I can hoe like the devil."

He spoke eagerly while watching the disappearing group out of the corner of his eye with a certain wistfulness.

Nat Page glanced down uneasily at the man, who scarcely reached his shoulders, but who was as thick across the chest as himself. He felt embarrassed by such devotion from an elder.

"Ye'd better scoot along with the others," he advised.

"Au diable with them," answered Bartineau promptly.

"There is n't work enough at home for me," explained Page.

"I won't eat more 'n a dog," persisted Bartineau. "Sacr  — I will sleep in the barn and hoe like the devil."

The younger man shook his head with a good-natured laugh which revealed sound white teeth.

"What about that sister ye was always talkin' about when ye was sick?"

Bartineau shuffled his feet. True enough, there was Nanette, who was mother and sister to about ten of them.

"Eh, bien," he stammered.

A shout from Sanderson startled them both. The

latter, who had a voice like the bellow of an ox, had come running back into the station as excited as an old woman.

"Where's Frenchy and the kid?" he demanded of the world in general.

At that moment the world in general consisted of two commercial travelers, a woman and her three children, a mild-mannered old gentleman, and a half-dozen baggagemen.

Page quickly extended his hand to Bartineau.

"Scoot along," he said. "They're lookin' for ye."

Six faithful henchmen rounded the corner at Sanderson's heels.

"Where's the kid?" they demanded in chorus.

The mother gathered her children around her, and the drummers made as though to help them look. The spirits of these drummers were like rain-washed things compared to the vibrant fever lusts that burned within these forest men. One of the children began to cry, and Sanderson, perceiving the lad's fear, swooped down upon him and raised him seven feet into the air.

"Ye be n't afeered o' me, be ye?" he demanded.

The child began instantly to chuckle, as he felt the strong fingers in his ribs. The mother reached up for her own. Sanderson dove into his pocket and

brought out a half-dollar, which he left in the boy's hand, and then with a whoop started off again.

The mother thought better of him and watched with some anxiety to see if he found his own kid. She saw him swoop down upon the six-foot blond giant who apparently bore this meek title.

"Good Gawd," panted Sanderson, "we thought we'd lost ye. This is the first time in my life I was ever twenty minutes in Bangor with a thirst still clawin' at my throat. Come on."

Page looked around as though for some way of escape.

"I've got to get to St. Croix this afternoon," he answered firmly.

"What's that, kid? D'ye think we've nussed ye through th' winter fer nothin'? Why, ye ain't ben christened yet!"

"But I've got to get my train," he insisted uncomfortably.

As they began to jostle him towards the street, Bartineau looked up at his comrade for his cue. Though it would have been a foolish and hopeless struggle, he was willing at a nod to throw himself into the fight. During the long vigil in the isolated shack used as a pesthouse, Page had told him something about those black eyes: so, shouldering off the nearest man, Bartineau clenched his fists and waited.

For a second Page swept the circle of faces around him. These were all his comrades. He knew the custom of the drive and had no wish to violate it, but the train to St. Croix left in an hour and he must take that train. He figured that he might go with them and still get back. He nodded.

"Ain't he knowin' fer a young un!" exclaimed Big Ben, praising him with a grin.

Bartineau kept close, and the others formed a sort of loose bodyguard, as though still fearing the boy might change his mind. So they marched noisily past the offices of Bangor's sterling business men — men who were sterling because these same dare-devils were willing to risk their lives for their lumber; so they hooted and shouted down one street after another, ready to argue with any one who challenged their wild freedom; so they came to the swinging doors.

Behind the bar, where only Uno beer, two per cent strong, was displayed, sat old Simmons, like a hibernating bear. He lifted his bulk as Sanderson broke in, and greeted him with a smile from his pig eyes. As man after man followed at the leader's heels until the room was filled, old Simmons glanced uneasily about.

"What is it, gents — beer?"

He was reaching for a bottle of Uno, when San-



derson raised his hand as though about to pronounce a benediction.

"My son," he began in an injured voice, "it's some forty years since I quit drinkin' pap. It did n't agree with me. It was too all-fired strong, and so I took the pledge. I swore'd by all the red-eyed jumpin' devils thet I would n't never ag'in tech nothin' but forty rod. An' ter-day we've brought erlong another infant who's goneter take the same pledge. Bring it out — by the gallon."

Simmons looked over the group uneasily, for there were one or two he did n't recognize. But Sanderson leaned over the bar and plac'd a heavy hand upon the fat shoulder.

"By the gallon," he repeated.

Simmons opened a trap door and brought forth a milk-can. He placed it on the bar and brought out twenty tumblers. Sanderson set the example by filling his half full, and the others followed. Page was last. He hesitated and then half filled his own glass.

"Here's to th' kid," announced Sanderson, raising his tumbler.

The others nodded and drank off in a gulp the liquid fire that clawed their throats as it went down. The younger man drank little liquor, for he neither liked the taste of it nor needed it to quicken his pulse.

He managed to spill most of the contents of his glass on the floor. He tossed a bill in payment of the round upon the bar.

Again the glasses were filled, this time on Sanderson. The stuff went to the heads of these fresh earthy men as swiftly as fire to the core of a pitch-pine knot. Almost instantly the talk grew loud and boastful. Some one told a story, a pointless story with nothing to recommend it but its rank obscenity. Page had heard it before in camp, and it had sounded bad enough even then, but now within fifty miles of St. Croix it made him uncomfortable. A roar of laughter greeted the yarn, and Big Ben capped it with one still dirtier. Glasses were filled once more.

Bartineau was beginning to show the effect of his drinks, and Page knew the possible consequences of that. Bartineau went clean raving mad when drunk. He fought and squandered and ran riot until there was nothing left of him but the empty shell of a man.

Edging nearer the Frenchman, Page spoke to him.

"I would n't drink another," he said.

Pierre, hot-eyed, looked up. He hesitated a second and then threw glass and all on the floor.

"Eh, bien," he said.

But Big Ben caught the act, and, sensitive enough with drink to make an insult of it, seized Bartineau by the shoulder.

"Thet the way ye drink with me? Eh?"

"It's my fault," Page interrupted. "He's had enough."

"And who th' hell be you?" demanded Big Ben.

"No harm meant," answered Page good-naturedly.

"No harm? Then prove it."

Ben ordered another round of drinks, and once again Bartineau hurled his liquor at the big man's feet. Livid with rage, Ben faced Page.

"An' ye — ye six-foot runt — what be you goneter do?"

Without answering and with a smile still lurking around the corners of his blue eyes, Page very deliberately spilled his forty rod upon the floor.

"I've had enough too," he explained.

For a second Ben stared in livid rage. Then leaping forward, he threw the contents of his own glass full in the face of the younger man.

"I'll christen ye proper," he exploded.

"Gents," pleaded Simmons from behind the bar, "act like gents."

But Bartineau had sprung and was hanging about Big Ben's shoulders, clawing for his throat like a

mountain cat. Page reached over and tore the Frenchman loose.

"This is my row — if there's goneter be a row," he said.

"Sacré Bleu," pleaded Bartineau. "Let me have him, let me have him."

But Page handed the squirming dwarf to Sanderson. Even now, with the smart of the liquor still in his eyes, he was remarkably cool. Though Ben was stripping off his coat and the men had closed in to make a ring, he looked on unconcernedly with his big arms folded over his chest.

"Ye're ten years older than me, Ben," he said. "Say ye did n't mean that an' we'll call it quits."

"If ye're skeered," sneered Ben, "I'll keep one hand behind my back."

Page winced at this, but he answered in a slow drawl:

"I'm skeered, but I ain't skeered for myself."

He was honest in this statement. He knew his own strength and the advantage he had in not being in liquor. It would n't be a fair fight.

But the big fellow before him had the devil in him, and by now was crazy-mad and crazy-confident. If he was ten years older, he was ten years tougher. And three tumblers of raw whiskey were burning within him. Without waiting he struck out with his

right, and catching Page off his guard almost floored him. He rushed again, but this time the latter warded off the blow, and guarding his face with his left took time to shake off his coat.

It took three men to hold Bartineau from the time the fight began until it ended. To the onlookers it seemed like a one-sided contest, for Big Ben did all the rushing, while Page apparently had his hands full in merely warding off the attack. That much, however, he did successfully. Ben could neither break through nor break down his guard. This lasted for twenty minutes by the clock over the bar, and then Ben in a frenzy began to use up his breath in volley after volley of foul oaths. He grew blind and desperate with rage. Time after time he threw his whole two hundred pounds into a blow only to find it wasted by a quick side step.

So another five minutes passed, and then Page caught sight of the time. He had just fifteen minutes left in which to catch his train. Dodging another wild rush, he spoke as Ben recovered himself.

"Call it quits," he pleaded.

"Not till I've pounded ye to within an inch o' yer life," growled Ben.

For a moment the younger man looked worried. Then his cheeks suddenly flushed hectic and he stepped in close. The onlookers moved nearer.

Three times Page landed on the bearded face, and then, as Big Ben staggered back, quite deliberately followed him up. With a powerful right swing he struck the big man once more full on the chin, the blow crashing through uplifted arms. Ben dropped in his tracks like an ox under the butcher's mallet.

"Ye've killed him," whined Simmons.

They let Bartineau loose, and he rushed to the side of the prostrate man.

"Sacré if he has n't killed him; let me finish the job," he panted.

But, shoving Bartineau away, Page knelt by Big Ben's side and for a moment watched his breathing.

"He'll come round," he said as he rose and put on his coat. He beckoned to Bartineau, and as the two passed out the swinging doors, no one tried to bar their way. Once in the open Page shook himself like a big Newfoundland just out of the water.

"I tried to tucker him out," he said, "but he's tougher than an ox."

"He is the son of a yellow dog," declared Bartineau.

At the station Page helped Pierre purchase his ticket back to Nanette. When his own train pulled out, he left the man sitting on a truck disconsolately staring at the bit of green cardboard. He waved him good-by and made his way into the smoker,

where he waited impatiently for the train to cover the miles to St. Croix. From here he had a fifteen-mile walk; and this was better, for when he was active the time passed more rapidly.

And yet, when he finally saw the slight figure of Julie Moulton in the yard of the Miller house, where she boarded, he said only,

“How are ye, Julie?”

She looked up with a smile that hardly expressed even surprise.

“Why, hello, Nat,” she answered. “Home again?”

But she extended her hand, and the feel of her warm fingers gave him something to dream about all the next week.

## CHAPTER II

### *Spring*

**J**ULIE sat behind the teacher's desk in the tiny district school which huddles among the trees, like a bird's nest, half-way down the side of Hio Hill where the latter slopes sharply to the intervale at the base of Eagle Mountain. As it happened, she was not studying the text-book on English grammar which she had opened for that ostensible purpose, but the light hair and handsome face of 'Gene Page, one of her pupils. The latter occupied the last bench in the rear of the room — a position of honor owing its popularity, strangely enough, to the fact that it was farthest removed from her pretty black eyes. Except that she was the school teacher and so theoretically should have no interest whatever in her charges save of an educational nature, no one could possibly blame her for filling in the drowsy leisure of the late afternoon in this way. It would be a very anæmic Lady Psyche who could avoid occasional contemplation of those gray-blue eyes, those lean but comely features, that hair which



in the sunlight looked as golden as a child's. A man might have made the general criticism that 'Gene was a trifle too comely for one almost full grown, but Julie was as far removed from being a man as it is well possible for any one to be. She revealed her womanhood, as well as the French blood she inherited from her mother, in every slim but well-rounded line, from her jet-black hair and rose-leaf cheeks to the tips of her dainty shoes peeping from beneath virginal white skirts.

Moreover, she was young. She kept this a dark secret as far as possible, but with perfect truth she could claim barely nineteen years, which still left her a month younger than 'Gene. This was not an unusual condition for a school in the backwoods of Maine, but it was an obtrusive fact, nevertheless, in this particular school. Finally, if further explanation of her preoccupation need be given, it was spring. The pines, which extended in unbroken array from the rear of this box-like building to the top of Eagle Mountain towering high in the background on the left, responded with aromatic redolence to a kindlier sun than they had known for eight months and filled the air with balsamic fragrance. A large bunch of Mayflowers on her desk, surreptitiously left before school opened that morning by Nat Page, added their perfume to that of the

pinetrees. In the oaks across the road she heard squirrels at their chattering play. From the greening pastures on the hill she caught, borne on a lazy breeze, the trembling bleat of sheep sounding plaintive warning to their adventurous progeny. Birds whistled and scolded in mating song and wrangle from the near-by bushes. There was a sense of life and freshness everywhere. It came in at the open windows and open door, brightening the whole barren interior of the class room.

Three sides of this room were bounded by blackboards, now spattered with the hieroglyphics of fractions and with awkward big-lettered words scrawled during the spelling lesson. To Julie these dead chalk marks looked at the end of the day like white, charred bones in a desert. This afternoon, however, a name which seemed to have magic in it had been left like an oasis in the midst of them. It read RIO DE JANEIRO. 'Gene had written it in his pretty, almost feminine hand during the lesson in physical geography. It had no especial significance to her except of its own, but her heart had leaped at sound of it. It suggested blue skies, golden sands, and scudding white-sailed ships. It suggested tropical foliage and coral reefs — romance and adventure. 'Gene had confided in her that when he went to sea he should visit that port. The confession had

lighted within her a strange fire. Were she a man it was just what she herself would do. She envied him, and after this read into him every wild dream of her own.

She was seated on a raised platform behind a wooden desk fronted by a row of text-books, a large ink-bottle, two or three pen-holders, a ruler, a paper bag of confiscated gumdrops, and a thin wooden box of chalk. Beyond this, at rude benches marked and gouged and carved by succeeding proprietors of huge jack-knives, sat her fifteen pupils. Nine of these were girls; six were boys. The former, in home-made dresses of bright calico, ranged in age from Capitola Stevens, who could hardly manage her slate and whose saucy pigtail was a constant source of temptation to every boy in school, to Miss Evelina Worthington, who did her hair in a pug-knot which occupied most of her attention. There was an equally wide range in the ages of the boys; Tommy Flint being only seven, but with a well-developed capacity for trouble-making that would have done credit to one twice his years. Julie Moulton was forced to watch him all over. There was no portion of his anatomy incapable of mischief; he could move his scalp and wiggle his ears, he could grimace like an ape, shoot spit-balls without moving his fingers, and reach unbelievable distances with his

feet. She had suspected those feet all day long. Several commotions had started in their vicinity, but she had n't yet detected the pin arranged in the toe of one stub boot which served as the efficient cause. At present he was crouched innocently enough behind his geography. The latter suggested Rio de Janeiro once more, and this in turn inevitably suggested 'Gene.

When 'Gene smiled, Rio de Janeiro seemed only a careless vagabond's journey away. His eyes grew brilliant, and one forgot the responsibility of his six-foot body, his deep chest, his long arms. He escaped a great many duties with that smile and his ready tongue. To this end he made further use of the fact that he was only a younger brother. Nat resembled him like a twin except that the former was built on still leaner, hardier lines, being two years older.

Suddenly Julie became conscious that she herself was being observed. Her cheeks flushed a dark crimson, as with deep concentration she immediately began a minute study of the ink-spots on her desk. One of these resembled Medusa, another a full-rigged ship, another the island of Guadeloupe of the lower Antilles. She knew 'Gene was still watching her with a lazy smile and knew that he knew she knew it. In sudden rebellion she raised her head

with a swift autocratic challenge. His eyes flamed up in response. His expression became insolently confident. In her heart Julie trembled for the outcome. When with a quick smile he turned again to his geography, she gave a sigh of relief and opened the book in front of her.

## CHAPTER III

### *On Hell Fire*

**I**F a man has any imagination at all, he lives two lives in the winter woods: the one outside himself, which is made up of hard, biting work, hunger, food, fatigue, and sleep; the other within himself, which is anything he will. There is much time for dreams while swinging an axe and the trees and the silence and the quiet snow-bound shadows foster and cherish such dreams.

Nat had left Julie in the fall with a simple hand clasp and returned to nothing more in the spring, but within him a great change had in the meanwhile taken place. For six months the girl had lived in his heart and shared with him the best of that life. At first she had come into his thoughts shyly, as a woman who to him seemed wonderfully beautiful, wonderfully dainty, with the charm of some tender wild flower. But as he became more familiar with her through daily association, this shyness wore away and she seemed less flowerlike and more maidenlike. With this his dreams grew

more personal, more vital, until they culminated during that four weeks in the pesthouse with Bartineau into something surprisingly like the dreams of a lover. So when he came back and found the girl herself unchanged and realized that she, after all, knew nothing of what had taken place within him, much of his shyness returned, and he contented himself with the occasional glimpses of her which he caught as she went back and forth to school.

But within him the yearning for more grew apace. Before her living presence the old dreams returned to mock him. Yet in spite of this it took him a week to gather courage to make his way to the foot of Hio Hill one afternoon with the determination of meeting her after school and walking back with her. And then, after all, as she came along with 'Gene by her side, his courage failed him and he remained hidden.

He watched the two go up the hill, laughing and chatting as they went, and he did not like the picture. This did not spring from jealousy. He was n't small enough to feel any resentment towards the girl. His feeling was all against 'Gene.

In the few days since his return from camp Nat had found the breach between himself and his brother widening to a point where it was becoming

difficult for him to control himself. He had never liked the boy. Since they were children together, they had quarreled, though it had always been impressed upon Nat that as an older brother it was his duty to endure. This he had done, and 'Gene had taken advantage of it to go still further in his hectoring.

But now two facts altered the situation: he had come home with new standards and 'Gene had grown to man size. For six months Nat Page had seen men judged by the stern laws of the woods, which measure men for what they are and nothing else. By this measure he knew that 'Gene fell far short of the stature of a man, even though he had the bulk of a man. 'Gene would not have lasted a day, for instance, in the same crew with Pierre Barteau; he was too shifty in his eyes, too loose in his tongue, too eager for himself. In his heart Nat suspected that if ever cornered 'Gene would n't even fight fair. In camp such men are quickly dealt with.

And yet in spite of this the man was well enough on the outside and in ordinary speech was both quick and fair-spoken. The trouble seemed to lie within. Even as a child 'Gene had been popular with the petticoats and at loggerheads with his fellows, and now that he had grown there seemed to be no change as there should have been a change.



The sky was losing its starkness when Nat started home again. In the distance he heard the jingling of the cow bells as the kine edged nearer and nearer the pasture bars. But he had n't gone more than a hundred yards before he heard in the bushes back from the road another sound — the broken sobbing of some one trying hard to control his grief. He paused a moment and listened, and then in half a dozen strides forced his way through the undergrowth, where he found himself confronting the frail figure of Tommy Flint, who with clenched fists faced the intruder aggressively. The boy's cheeks were stained with tears, and his lower lip was still trembling. In spite of this the lad looked so pugnacious that Nat could not refrain from smiling.

"What's the trouble, son?" he asked.

"Nothin'," answered Tommy, glancing uneasily over his shoulder.

"Just cryin' for the fun of it?" inquired Nat.

"Who's ben cryin'?" Tommy challenged, his lip beginning to tremble again.

Nat looked away from him.

"Maybe it was a chipmunk I heard."

"It ware n't," confessed Tommy. "It was me."

"So?" Nat inquired indifferently.

For a moment Tommy stared at his toes; then he blurted out:

"Dad's in yonder."

Nat looked up quickly.

"Well?" he asked with a frown.

"He's goneter git converted," whimpered Tommy.

"Well, don't cry about that, son. I reckon it won't hurt him none."

"It ain't that," sobbed the boy, "but he's so darned happy 'bout it he's got drunk as hell."

"Where is he?" Nat asked quickly.

Tommy pointed to a clump of bushes just beyond. Nat strode over there and almost tripped over the prostrate form of the boy's father. The latter roused himself sleepily.

"Tommy," he muttered with profound gravity, "Tommy, ye've gotter be saved if — has to whale ye for it."

He tried to make his elbow, but at sight of Nat dropped back again.

"Hello," he greeted the latter affably.

"Ye'd better get up and get home," suggested Nat.

"Don't bother me," answered Flint. "I've gotter go to meetin' to-night. I've gotter git saved to-night."

"To-night?" answered Nat. "Then ye have n't more 'n time to git sobered off."

Grasping the man by his shoulder, he helped him to his feet. Tommy began to sob again.

"Don't hurt him," pleaded the boy. "He did n't do nothin' to me. Honest, he did n't."

"I 'm not goneter hurt him," answered Nat, "but he can't go home this way."

This was n't the first time that he had brought the old man home sober, and the gentle faded eyes of the wife always repaid him for his trouble. He steadied Flint down the hill and then into the woods where the brook made a good-sized bathing pool.

"Strip," he ordered. "Tommy will stand near the road to see that no one's coming."

"Look a here," protested Flint, "it ain't time to be baptized yet. It ain't fair to baptize a feller afore meetin'."

"I reckon it won't hurt you none to be baptized afore and after," replied Nat grimly.

Flint obeyed reluctantly, for he had been in Nat's hands before and knew the uselessness of argument. Nat led him to the pool and ducked him three times in as matter-of-fact a fashion as he might duck a puppy, and after this made him run ten times in a wide circle around a big pine to bring his blood to the surface once more. By the time Flint was in his clothes again he was sober as a judge.

"Now," said Nat, "you're fit to go home and you're fit to go to meetin'."

Old Flint shook his head.

"I've lost the hankerin'," he affirmed.

"For what?" inquired Nat. "Rum or religion?"

Flint looked up with the grieved expression of a man who has been grossly misunderstood.

"I hain't teched a drop — fer, let me see —"

He brought his brows together in deep thought, as though the date were so far back in the past that he could n't off-hand remember it.

"Then," advised Nat, "I'd quit religion. And I would n't whale the boy any more, neither, if I was you."

Again Tommy lifted his voice.

"He did n't hurt me none, honest!"

Flint's face grew serious. If there was n't a strong line in it, neither was there a vicious line.

"Did I whale ye, Tommy?" he asked anxiously.

"Only 'cause I did n't know how to pray," answered Tommy.

Flint finished tying the laces to his shoe. Then he rose determinedly.

"Well," he avowed with conviction, "ye oughter know how to pray. I reckon I'll send you and your ma to meetin' ter-night."

Tommy looked uneasy.

"I don't mind the whalin' none," he declared.

"Both of ye had better go home and stay there," put in Nat. "I've got to run along now. Are you straight again?"

Flint stepped back hastily from the edge of the brook.

"Never straighter in my life," he answered quickly. "Watch me walk. Come on, Tommy."

He started off at a brisk gait, with Tommy at his heels. With exaggerated eagerness to prove his point he walked a plumb line. Nat watched the two disappear and then started on.

As he neared the Miller place, his steps lagged. His eyes swept every window in the hope that he might catch a glimpse of Julie, but he looked in vain.

The old Page house stood just below the crest of Hio Hill exactly as built seventy-five years before. Except for a few shingles and clapboards nothing within this period had been added to it. It was an unpainted structure a story and a half high, with a long shed connecting with a barn three times its own size. The wind and the rain and the sun had stained the buildings a silver gray. The shingles on the roof were warped and mossy, and many of the clapboards had worked free from their rusty iron

nails. The door-sills were worn deep and the windows rattled loosely. And yet in spite of all these evidences of age the old buildings did not suggest decay so much as mellow ripeness; they did not suggest poverty so much as substance. One felt that time had merely tested them. It was the land around the buildings that gave an index to the owner's financial standing and these spoke well for the Page family. Twenty acres were under cultivation, ten more were in orchards, and some fifty acres furnished good pasturage for cows and sheep.

Before the house five tall elms clawed at the sky, their lean trunks extending high above the roof and spreading out into great fan-shaped clusters of limbs. They were just budding. A wild tangle of a flower garden now filled with dead stalks was scattered either side of the front door. The latter was never used except for funerals. In the yard lay a wood-sled with rusting runners just where the snow had deserted it. Beyond this an old pung had been ten years in dropping to pieces. Near the well with its long sweep stood a grindstone. In and out around these relics some thirty hens with as many pullets at their heels were scratching the young grass, making the most of what daylight remained.

The barnyard with its narrow miry lane leading into the south pasture lay to the right of the barn.

The cows were already waiting patiently at the bars, chewing their cuds slowly, laboriously, thoughtfully.

It was half-past six before Nat finished his milking and joined the rest of the family at supper. These meals were sturdy, serious affairs. Neither Nat nor his father ever attempted conversation, and though 'Gene and his mother exchanged at this time the gossip of the neighborhood it was in jerky sentences with many long silent lapses.

This evening it was not until the pie was reached that any one spoke. Then Mrs. Page rested her eyes upon her younger son.

"I do wish, 'Gene," she said anxiously, "that you and Nat could tend out on some of them revival meetin's down to the village."

'Gene lifted his head with interest.

"What for?" he demanded, as he scented a chance for argument.

"They say that revival preacher is doin' a mighty work," she answered.

"Gideon?"

"The Reverend Elisha Gideon," she answered with mild rebuke.

"Did n't know preachers ever worked," 'Gene replied.

"It's work for the Lord," returned Mrs. Page simply. "They do say that over twenty have ben

washed in the blood. Even old John Flint is cavin' — so Deacon Miller was a-tellin' me."

"Has the Deacon himself been washed yet?" inquired 'Gene with a grin.

"'Gene!" protested his mother.

Joshua lifted his head and winked heavy encouragement at the boy.

"I did n't know, ma," went on 'Gene soberly, "I seen the Deacon yesterday and he did n't look whiter 'n snow then." He added, meeting her anxious eyes with innocent childishness, "But maybe it would take more 'n one washin' to clean the Deacon."

"I don't think you oughter poke fun at sech things," she answered seriously.

"Has n't the Deacon closed in on old Flint's farm?" inquired 'Gene.

"Would n't give him twenty-four hours o' grace," put in Joshua.

Mrs. Page moved uneasily.

"I s'pose that's business, ain't it?" she suggested weakly.

"The Lord's business?" inquired 'Gene without smiling.

"Wal —"

There was the sound of carriage wheels in the yard and Mrs. Page looked at 'Gene guiltily.



"I reckon that's the Deacon now," she stammered. "I told him maybe you boys would go to meetin' with him to-night."

'Gene shoved back his chair.

"I reckon Nat would," he suggested, "but I've got to get my lessons."

The Deacon came in before 'Gene could make good his escape and was hospitably greeted by Mrs. Page. He was an under-sized man with two ferret eyes which peered out from above a shaggy growth of full beard, as though peeking over a hedge. His voice was cracked and his hands trembled. When he spoke, it was always in a tone of complaint. The world was a monstrously evil place to Deacon Miller and needed close watching. He was almost through with it now, and at times realized this with a fear that left him short of breath. He took out a big heavy watch and held it close to his weak eyes.

"Ev'nin'," he wheezed. "Be the boys ready?"

Mrs. Page dodged the question.

"You'll have a cup of tea afore you start?" she begged.

"Service begins a quarter to eight," he reminded her.

He turned to Joshua, who had seated himself by the stove and was now placidly pressing down the

tobacco in his corncob pipe. His voice changed to a feeble monotonous singsong.

"Ye 'd better come along, Josh. The word of the Lord has gone forth."

Joshua held a lighted sulphur match to his pipe until it burned down to his calloused thumb.

"I reckon you're right," he nodded slowly between puffs.

He was neither skeptical nor indifferent, but he had come to lean upon his wife in all such matters. He firmly believed that she was pious enough to sweep him along, if not the boys, with her.

From the rear of the room 'Gene spoke up.

"Yes," he echoed, "the word of the Lord has gone forth."

They all faced him. There was a quality in his young voice which commanded attention whenever he spoke with a purpose, for it then lost all trace of sharpness and came full and strong from his chest. He was leaning against the wall, but now he stepped forward with his head held high. One might almost have thought him inspired. His eyes grown big, rested upon first one and then another. He caught the Reverend Gideon's very intonation.

"The word of the Lord has gone forth," he repeated, "and oh, my bretheren, the word of the Lord is mighty. All ye who repent not and ain't washed

in the blood of the lamb 'll go down into everlastin' Hell fire. D' ye realize the awfulness of that fire, my bretheren? Ye light a match and hold it to your pipe and it feels hot, but a million sech matches burning all to once would be like the Norther's in December 'longside a single spark of Hell fire. Ye put your hand in a burning candle and get scorched. It hurts, but ye 'd welcome it like water from a frozen lake — a million miles away from Hell fire. See the wood crackling in the stove yonder!"

He pointed at the hot, warped covers. They all followed his finger.

"Lift the covers and put in your hand!" he exclaimed.

The Deacon withdrew his hands behind his back.

"Open the covers and put in your hands," shouted 'Gene. "Leave them there to sizzle and burn. You 'd welcome the cool of that afore you 'd reached the outer rim of Hell fire. The scratchin' hurt of them little flames would seem like balm of Gilead to you afore you even seed the *light* of distant Hell fires."

"Hallelujah," interrupted the Deacon fervently.

"For Hell fire burns in a pit a million miles deep and a million miles wide, and every lost soul is plumb in the middle of it with devils a-makin' faces at him over the brim."

"Amen," shouted the Deacon. Mrs. Page sat with her cold hands clasped in her lap. Joshua's pipe had long since gone out. Nat was not moved like the others, yet he marveled and was more than half convinced that this time 'Gene was in earnest. He had heard of these sudden conversions.

For fifteen minutes longer 'Gene continued his exhortation without pause, without once faltering for words. His cheeks became flushed and his eyes grew bigger than ever. The Deacon broke in more and more frequently with nervous Hallelujahs and fervent Amens. Mrs. Page sat transfixed.

The boy stopped abruptly and the ensuing silence was in itself impressive. He raised his eyes. Standing there so, he looked veritably like some youthful prophet. Then, in a low voice he began to pray — a prayer for those who sin unconsciously, for those who deal harshly with their fellowmen, for those who are sharp in trade. Closer and closer he drew the lines around the Deacon, and yet with such skill that the words might have applied equally well to any of a dozen other men in the neighborhood. He exhorted that such might be kept from Hell fire through the saving grace of the Lord. He pleaded so earnestly that the effect was only to emphasize the implied hopelessness of the plea.

The Deacon listened with startled eyes. His

asthmatic breathing could be heard even above 'Gene's voice. He leaned forward with his fingers writhing in terror. Then impulsively he fell upon his sharp knees and raised his bony hands on high.

"Lord — Lord, forgive," he cried.

He made a pitiful figure. Nat watched him with a lump in his throat, without daring to look at 'Gene. He trembled for what might be the awful climax. When 'Gene stopped, Nat kept his eyes on the old man, his body in a cold perspiration of anticipation. But again 'Gene surprised him. He walked past the trembling penitent without speaking and disappeared into the next room.

Silence followed his exit. Nat wished to get out into the air, but he did n't dare move. He was stifled — uneasy. He hated such scenes as these. He heard his mother weeping softly. Then he saw the Deacon rise and take her hand.

"The lad has the gift o' tongues," he faltered. "Thet — thet was a message straight from on high."

Joshua grunted. He rather resented having been moved.

"Or straight from Hell," he answered.

"Josh," the Deacon stammered fervently, "ye won't be doin' your duty by the Lord ef ye don't put thet boy into the meenistry. God bless him. God bless him. I'm goin' home and git straight

down on my marrow bones and pray the rest of the night."

He staggered towards the door. Nat helped the old man into the buggy and handing him the reins, saw him drive off.

He himself wanted to walk. The clear sky was pierced by countless needle points, and it made him think somehow of Julie. In the Miller house just below, where she boarded, he saw that the windows were still lighted. He started in that direction, but he was n't more than out of the yard before he was checked by 'Gene's voice. He turned and saw the boy on the front porch puffing at a corncob pipe.

"Where goin'?" inquired 'Gene.

"Nowhere special," answered Nat uneasily.

'Gene stepped forward. He always relished his victories best through Nat.

"I reckon the Deacon 'll smell sulphur ter-night," he observed. "He's got a soul so small ye could put it in a mustard-seed and hear it rattle. I did n't think he had even soul 'nuff to warm up."

For a second Nat studied his brother with some curiosity.

"'Gene," he finally asked, "d'ye really b'lieve all that stuff?"

"What d'ye think I am?" answered 'Gene with a grin. "A blamed fool?"

For a second longer Nat studied him, then he answered quietly:

“No, I should n’t say that. I should call ye just a blamed liar.”

He waited a moment, half hoping his brother might resent the statement. But the latter only laughed.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Julie Makes a Discovery*

**I**MMEDIATELY after supper Julie lighted her kerosene lamp and bade the Millers good-night. She wished to be alone. The episode of the afternoon was still on her nerves. She hurried up the narrow uncarpeted stairs, along the bare hall, and closed the door behind her with a sense of relief. She placed the lamp on the table by the window, and for a minute stood before the small mirror on her bureau tucking back into place loose wisps of hair. Every motion of her arms was made with unconscious grace.

The room in which she stood was bare to the point of crudeness. The wall paper had been faded these twenty years, the white curtains at the two windows had been patched over and over again, the floor was scantily covered with rag rugs. The only furnishings were a cheap painted bed, a yellow bureau, a washstand, and two wooden chairs. A worsted panel bearing the inscription "God bless our Home" and a cluster of varnished autumn leaves, relics of the



artistic taste of some deceased Miller relative, were the only concessions made to anything except utility. And yet in the six months she had occupied it Julie had made this distinctly her room and distinctly a maiden's room. Her personality had refined it. It was difficult to say where and how, but the result was as marked as the perfume of unseen wild flowers in a somber grove. A man would have known in an instant that these four walls had been sweetened by the presence of a young woman. There was something girlish about the hang of the curtains; something maidenly about the precise arrangement of the few of Julie's personal belongings which could be seen. And then from ceiling to floor every nook and corner was as immaculately spotless as a nun's cell. She feminized everything with which she came in contact. She imparted sex to her gloves, to her letter paper, even to her books.

Julie gave a single swift look of approbation at herself and crossing to the windows started to pull down the shades, but catching a glimpse of the clear sky, changed her mind. Curtains here were purely a convention, and she craved just now the fellowship of the stars. She seated herself by the lamp and picked up a book with a decision that expressed determination rather than interest.

She had taken this school, after graduating from

the village academy, in something the spirit of adventure. Her father, though the owner of a prosperous farm at St. Croix fifteen miles from here, had not objected, but her mother had looked upon the scheme with disapproval. The latter's French blood revealed itself in a desire to have her daughter remain at home and play the belle she undeniably might have been. When a girl happened to be straight and slim, when she had the deep coloring of a red rose, when she combined the hot beauty of France with something of the sober balance of New England, Mrs. Moulton believed with some common-sense that she could use these graces to better purpose than in teaching a district school on the fringe of a wilderness. The trouble was that Julie had no idea of using her graces at all. She had too much energy to do nothing, however, and so had accepted the only opportunity for seeing life which had offered itself. At first the monotony of her work had been broken by her over-Sunday visits at home, but of late she was half ashamed to admit that these visits were the only monotonous feature of the whole week.

Her book dropped into her lap. With a puzzled, anxious frown she leaned forward, elbow on knee, and gave up the attempt to interest herself in the story. The eyes which smiled back at her from the printed page were not the creations of any author's

brain; the voice which haunted her ears came from no greater distance than the winding country road which ran beneath her windows.

'Gene had been the source of a series of surprises to her on that walk up the hill this afternoon. He had never seemed so much a boy nor ever so much a man. The combination was bewildering. Her breath even now came faster at the memory of it. The uncertainty of the relation between them, whether that of boy and girl, or man and woman, had left them both free to venture further than either would have dared had it been definitely established either way. The situation was as piquant as it was dangerous. She felt like one who though on neutral ground runs the constant danger of overstepping an unmarked dead line and finding himself in the enemy's territory.

Even now, while smiling at some boyish sally of 'Gene's, she found herself perplexed over the question of why she need fear him even as a man. There was a tremendous amount in him that appealed to her. She had never seen a man who physically was so attractive. She withdrew instinctively from contact with most men, but she could hardly keep her hands away from 'Gene's silky blond hair. She never tired of watching his clear blue eyes with the touch of devilry in the back of them. For the rest

he was so strong-muscled and big-chested that at times he overpowered her with an attraction such as tempts some people to the dizzy edge of great heights.

She was not offended by 'Gene's crudities of speech and manner. They did not seem to matter. Back of them there was a power that made one forget. Nor did she class him as her mental inferior in spite of his laboring efforts in many of the simple studies she taught him. A dozen times a day he showed flashes of imagination that left her feeling the pupil. He seemed to grasp intuitively many things that she was unable to understand by study.

Moreover, all these details were trivialities in the face of the deeper attraction he had for her at times. Whatever this was, both defied and scorned analysis. It simply was. It was absurd to ask why, when in talking he leaned towards her, she felt herself powerless to move. It was absurd to ask any one to explain, much less herself, why at times the blood leaped to the tingling roots of her hair at a glance from him. The phenomenon frightened her, yet she never felt like running. There was a touch of the brute in him, and she was no different from most women in admiring that so long as she was safe from it. With the world still protecting her, it smacked

only of the masterful. Twice this afternoon she had glimpsed that side of him, and now in recalling it safe in the shelter of her room she felt a sharp yearning for the boy. The room suddenly grew tight and close. She rose, blew out her light, and throwing a wrap over her shoulders opened the window and leaned out.

'Gene had talked to her about the ocean and the lands over the seas. He said he wished to see the world a bit before he died. She had smiled at that. It was impossible to think of any one so brimful of life as 'Gene ever dying. It was as impossible as to think of herself as dying. But he had looked very wise and serious and declared that you can never tell when your time is coming. She could have patted his arm at that, as one might comfort a small boy lost in a vast grove of oaks within earshot of the house. He had written, he said, to a cousin who was a sea-captain, and as soon as he heard from him would be off. Probably he would sail around the world. He certainly would go to Rio de Janeiro and possibly he might venture into Africa.

She had looked worried at mention of Rio de Janeiro. She had smiled the next second when he talked of Africa. Then he spoke so soberly of his wild plans that she found herself not only believing

them but thrilling with them. It was n't necessary for him actually to have hairbreadth 'scapes on sea and land; it was enough to take one's breath to hear him talk about them in prospect. Unconsciously he swaggered about as manfully as though it all had been and he had just returned with the tan of sea winds on his face and the smell of salt in his clothes. Ah, well, he had looked very handsome.

In leaving her he had taken her hand.

"Come along with me!" he had exclaimed.

He was just the schoolboy again.

"If I were a man, I would," she had laughed back. Now she raised her eyes with a mischievous smile at memory of it. As she did so, she caught sight of a shadowy figure standing in the road staring up at her window. She knew it was 'Gene, and with a startled cry withdrew in the hope that she had not been seen. She waited in the dark, not daring to move. Then she heard his voice.

"Julie."

She did not answer.

"Julie, come to the window a second."

She shrank still farther back. She was both frightened and angered. He had no right to do such a thing as this. It was a schoolboy trick and she was ashamed of him for it.

She heard below a scraping sound. She held her

breath. As she listened, she caught the crack of small branches and the rustle of leaves. It was evident that he was climbing the small maple which grew near her window. It was almost unbelievable. She stood transfixed. She was n't considering the consequences of his detection by a passer-by; she was gripped by a feeling of her own helplessness. She heard the branches rustle higher and higher; she heard his steady breathing as he lifted himself nearer and nearer. Finally the limbs which brushed her window-sill began to swish. For a second she had the impulse to run forward, close the window, and crouch back again in her corner. But only for a second. If she did that, she was afraid of what he might attempt next.

When she heard his voice again, it sounded as though it were in the room. She blushed hotly, trembling from head to foot.

"Julie," he whispered.

Still she could not move her lips. She thought she heard him laugh.

"I know you 're there," he persisted. "Do you want me to come in and find ye?"

She stumbled forward at that.

"Go away," she commanded.

"Listen a jiffy," he pleaded.

"I won't listen! 'Gene Page, go this minute."

"I'm goin'," he interrupted. "And maybe it's for good. I got my letter."

"Letter?"

She was standing by the window now, and her eyes met his. She saw them plainly. They were not two feet from hers.

"From the captain. He says I can come."

"He says you can come?"

She knew he was n't joking. He was in earnest. And yet she could n't make it seem quite real that 'Gene was going away.

"Can't you come out a minute and let me tell you about it?"

"No, no," she answered quickly. "Tell me to-morrow."

She forced her eyes from his. She hoped and prayed that he would not insist that she come out.

"To-morrow maybe I'll be gone," he answered.

"Why, you can't go as soon as that!" she exclaimed.

She was thoroughly surprised at herself. This seemed like a very serious matter — quite the most serious she had ever faced. Suddenly it appeared quite impossible that he should leave. In her bewilderment she said the only thing she could think of for the moment.



"You can't leave until the end of school."

He laughed softly at this.

"Come on out, Julie," he whispered. "They've all gone to bed."

"I can't! I can't!"

"Please."

"Don't ask me — again," she pleaded.

He was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"All right, Julie. But ye'll shake hands afore I go?"

He edged dangerously far out on the sagging limb, holding on with his left hand and reaching towards her with his right.

"'Gene," she faltered, "don't go to-morrow."

"I'll just have time to reach the boat if I start in the mornin'," he answered. "It sails from Boston to-morrow night."

She came nearer and gave him her hand. He seized it in a rough tight grip. It burned like fire within his.

"You must come out," he insisted. "I can't go away perhaps forever without seein' more of you than this. You need n't stay only a minute. But I've got to see you a minute."

She closed her eyes and tried to withdraw her hand. He held it tight.

"Only a minute an' I won't bother you ag'in."

I'd have gone to-night if it had n't been for you. Hurry and say you will."

He spoke feverishly and with a passion she could no longer resist. Against her best judgment, against her will, she nodded.

"Let me go. I'll come as far as the door."

He released her hand instantly.

"You're good, Julie. I'll wait there for ye."

As he lowered himself out of sight, she closed the window. She bolted it and drew the curtain. She did not know what made her do this. It was instinctive. Then for a moment she sat down on the edge of the bed and pressed her hot hands to her temples. She knew that she was going down to meet 'Gene; she knew that doubtless she would have gone just the same even if he had not pleaded with her. She was sane enough to realize this just as she was sane enough to realize she was unwise in going. Before 'Gene came she had already crossed the neutral zone. The point was that she must hold tight to that fact and keep herself on guard. Against what? She had no definite idea. Against herself perhaps more than anything else.

As she passed her bureau, she caught the scent of Nat's Mayflowers. She paused. The thought of Nat suddenly steadied her. She buried her nose in the cool pure fragrance of the pink petals. Her

face was still scarlet as she raised her head, but her knees no longer failed her. The mere fact that she was now able to associate 'Gene with his brother gave her the confidence which she had not found even in her muttered prayers. She thrust the flowers into her waist and crossed without fear to the door.

As she stole along the hall and down the squeaky stairs, she stopped a dozen times with her heart in her mouth, and each time she grew more ashamed. She did n't like this position in which she found herself. She had never in her life done anything surreptitiously. She was really more of a girl than 'Gene was a boy. Her training and her instincts were for innocency of act as well as thought. By the time she had turned the key in the lower door she was thoroughly determined to fulfill the letter of her promise to 'Gene and then hurry back. 'Gene reached forward and took her hand.

"We can't talk here," he warned in a low whisper.

"I don't want to talk," she answered soberly.

"I want to say good-by. I —"

"Come on," he pleaded, "just to the road. The Deacon has ears like a rabbit. He's up to-night — prayin'."

Before she could object he had closed the door behind her and was leading her towards the road.

Now that she was forced she went not unwillingly. It was natural enough for her to wish to hear something of his plans. It might even be her duty to persuade him out of them. He was young and reckless and perhaps foolhardy.

Hand in hand, they hurried across the yard and down the hill out of sight of the house. Here she made him stop.

"I won't go any farther," she declared.

She drew her wrap more closely about her slight shoulders and removed her hand from his. He towered above her like a giant. The moonlight softened all his features and made him look more a boy than ever. But the moonlight also made her feel very much alone with him. It was not long after eight, but here the whole world went to sleep at dark. She saw in the valley below her acre after acre of sleeping land and forest. The houses on the hill were as dark as though it were midnight. Back of this towered Eagle — a black pile. They two stood here alone, and this fact in itself threw her into a more intimate relationship with a man than she had ever known. Never before had she been so conscious of her sex. She somehow felt upon her shoulders the responsibility of all womankind. 'Gene tried to regain her hand, but she repulsed him

"No, no. Tell me — tell me what you are going to do."

"I've told ye all that," he answered sulkily.

"You've only told me that you were going."

"To-morrow mornin'. The ship sails to-morrow night for India or somewhere."

"For India?" she exclaimed.

The very word seemed to clothe him in romance. It associated him with silks and spices and warm winds and princes. She raised her eyes to his and saw a prince in him.

"Maybe I'll bring ye back a tiger skin," he said. She shuddered.

"Thank you, 'Gene," she faltered, "but I guess I don't want a tiger skin."

"You're afraid I'll be killed?" he asked eagerly.

"I'd rather you would n't be killed," she admitted.

"I guess if ye wanted a tiger skin or an elephant skin I'd bring ye a dozen," he avowed.

She believed him. As he threw back his big shoulders, it seemed probable that he could capture one alive if she wished it.

"I'd rather have a parrot," she hastened to assure him.

"Then I'll bring ye back a parrot," he agreed. "I'll bring ye back twenty."

He stepped nearer.

"Julie, there 's nothin' ye say I won't bring back to ye."

She laughed shyly. Surely a woman can hear nothing finer than the whole-souled promises of a big adventurer bound for India. And standing in the sheltered silence of these quiet New England hills, where life ordinarily went its uneventful way among sheep and grazing kine, it seemed doubly grand.

"One parrot will be enough," she said.

"An' I 'll bring ye silks and pearls," he promised hotly.

He lowered his voice and reached for her hand.

"For I 'm goin' out there for you. I 'm goin' out to make a fortune for you. Julie! Julie!"

She felt him drawing her into his arms. With a wild, blind struggle she fought her way free — that time. She had to fight not only him but herself. Every drop of red blood in her veins responded to his touch. Her freedom left her aching for the arms he still held out towards her. She covered her eyes with her hands.

"'Gene," she gasped, "please don't do — like that."

"I can't help it," he answered. "I can't help it. Don't cover up your eyes. I want to see you."

"Please," she moaned.

"I'm goin' away to-morrow," he ran on, as though he would make this his excuse. "Maybe I won't come back ag'in. Afore I go I've got to tell ye. I love you, Julie. I've loved you all along."

She uncovered her eyes.

"Love me?" she gasped.

Love! It came to her as fresh as a new-coined word. She had not thought of love. Even during her struggle with him she had not thought of that. And yet — and yet this explained it all. To her great relief it explained it all. He was pressing close to her again, and she stared at him big-eyed.

"An' you — you love me a little, Julie?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I can't tell."

"But you do! You must!" he insisted.

"I don't know," she answered weakly.

"Then you do!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"If you did n't love me, you 'd know it!"

She was still staring at him big-eyed.

"Would I, 'Gene?" she trembled.

"You 'd hate me," he declared.

She thought over this a second. Yes, she thought she would hate any other man but 'Gene who laid hands upon her as he had. She clung to this idea in defense of her self-respect. But why had she waited for him to tell her? And how did it happen

that he was so much wiser than she in these matters ?  
And why even now was she not quite convinced ?

His arms were still straining towards her, but she was stronger now to resist them.

" I — I can't, 'Gene," she whispered.

" Don't be offish," he exclaimed impatiently.

" You must give me a little time to think," she answered.

" What's the use of thinkin' ? " he protested.  
" After to-morrow ye 'll have a year or so to think."

" A year or so ? " she demanded with startled eyes.

" It takes a long time to go to India," he hastened to explain. It was the Now with which he was concerned, but he caught an expression in her face which disturbed him. Her eyes were dwelling more on the Future. Women seemed always to be doing that. He believed in letting the future take care of itself.

" But a year or so," she repeated.

" It 'll soon be gone," he assured her. " An' I 'll write 'most every day."

" Oh, you *will* write, 'Gene ? " she pleaded.

" 'Most every day. So now let me hold ye just a minute."

She hung her head. It seemed a small favor to grant. If at that moment he had seized her, she would not have cared, for with that word love ringing in her ears she was in a more sober mood.



But he waited, and as he waited she caught once more the perfume of the Mayflowers in her waist. She lifted her head as if she heard a voice, Nat's voice. She drew back guiltily.

"No," she answered, shaking her head, "not until I'm sure, 'Gene."

For a moment he watched her uncertainly. She was very beautiful. With her face flushed, her hair a trifle dishevelled from her struggle, her bosom rising and falling with her quick deep breathing, she was more tempting than he had ever seen her. His own dry lips receded from his irregular teeth. What held him in check he did not know, but he turned away angrily.

"All right," he said, "I guess you don't care."

"But I do care," she answered quickly. "It's because I care that I must be sure. There's mother and father and —"

He faced her fiercely.

"What do they count? What does any one count but you and me?"

"I'd have to ask them," she faltered.

"You have n't got to ask no one. I'm not goin' to sea for them; I'm goin' for you. An' I'd go if every man an' woman in the State of Maine told me not to. What do I care for them alongside o' you? What do I care what people say?"

He looked so very much like a prince as he said this that she began to sob lightly because she had hurt him. No one really did seem to count but just they two — there in the middle of this sleeping world. No one seemed to care except — the May-flowers. She ceased her sobbing.

“Good-by, 'Gene,” she said quickly. “I must go in. I — I'll write to you and — ”

“Write!” he exclaimed.

“As soon as I've had time to think.”

“An' ye won't let me kiss you once?”

“How can I? Why, how can I, 'Gene, when I don't know?”

“All right,” he nodded. “Then ye need n't take the trouble to write.”

“But I want to do that. I want to let you know before you reach India — and the tigers.”

“I guess I'll be glad enough of tigers when I get there,” he hinted darkly.

“But, 'Gene — ”

“Good-by,” he answered.

And before her astonished eyes he began to mount the hill. She watched him in a daze. He never turned. Before she recovered herself he was almost opposite the Miller house. Then she called:

“'Gene!”

He did not hear.

She ran a few steps towards him, still calling.

He did not turn.

Sinking down by the side of the road, she began to sob. And her aching heart poured out words of love for the man who had gone and could not hear.

## CHAPTER V

### *“ My Bully Boys — Ho! ”*

**I**N a tremor of excitement Julie found her way back to her room. The moment she admitted her love for 'Gene she had been seized by a passion that knew no control. The full flood of her wild young nature swept over all bounds and left her merely a creature of emotions. Nothing counted now against the onswEEP of this new love — not even the Mayflowers. She snatched them from her bosom and threw them across the room. She gave herself up utterly, without fear and without shame. The mere fact that the realization had come so suddenly, like flood water before decent channels can be made for it, left her passion free to run riot and overwhelm all barriers. Her mother and her father were mere shadows. She would have braved the scorn of all the women in the world now for 'Gene. Had he come back and taken her hand, she would have walked by his side until she dropped, knowing his arms would be waiting for her. The fact that he was going on the morrow gave both false courage

and false ardor. So far as she was concerned he had already gone, and this added further fuel to the fire. It furnished her a lurking sense of safety which she herself did not at all recognize, but which did away with the last vestige of restraint based upon the instinctive necessity of self-protection.

She threw herself upon her knees by her bed moaning 'Gene's name in an agony of reproach at the way she had allowed him to go. He had been such a big romantic figure striding off in the moonlight on his way to the ship that was to carry him to India — perhaps to his death in search of a tiger skin for her. His blond hair hung about his head like an aura. His blue eyes had been as deep as the Indian Ocean itself. She had been cruel — merciless to her gallant knight. If only he had turned when she called, she would have gone gladly into his arms — she would have given him a hundred kisses. Now, even now, kneeling there in the dark, she gave him all, freely and unabashed.

"'Gene," she murmured, "'Gene, come back to me. Come back for only a moment."

She thought she heard his voice calling to her again from the road. She crossed the room and threw up the window. An hour ago she had been afraid and terror-stricken at his approach. Now she stood at this same window ready to welcome him, her eyes

as eager as his had lately been. But he was nowhere to be seen. The tree branches rustled against the house, but they were not moved by his weight. The road was deserted. It was deserted as though it began nowhere and ended nowhere. It was a dead, barren road. She shuddered back from it and closing the window lighted her lamp.

Her heart was overflowing with things she wished to say to him but the chance had gone to tell them with his blue eyes resting upon her. Nothing was left now but ink and cold white paper. She seized her pen and began to write. She began simply,

"'GENE DEAR, — Why did n't you turn round when I called to you? I wanted you so much. But I know you did n't hear or you would have come back, would n't you? I tried to catch you but you walked so fast I could n't. I felt so weak I could n't run very fast. I ran as fast as I could, 'Gene, but something took all the strength out of me so that I could only sit down and cry. I wanted you and I want you now. I don't know how to tell you what I want to tell you. It is hard to say it here — alone. It would have been much easier — when you asked me. But I did n't know then, 'Gene. 'Gene dearest, I did n't know then, so you can't blame me, can you? But if you were standing here now and you asked me that question, I should have to say Yes."

She stopped and bending over the letter shyly kissed it at this place. She was very glad and

simple-hearted about it. Now that she had begun to write she was finding some relief for her pent-up emotions. She lost herself completely in the joy of talking to him again. She was not conscious of being in her room. She was again in the road and she saw him listening. She scribbled on, her thoughts moving so fast her pen could scarcely keep pace with them.

"And if you asked me now to do what you asked me before, I couldn't help giving in. I like to be very honest with you, dear, and so I'm going to tell you that I probably wouldn't want to do it, but that I wouldn't be able to help it. I'd rather kiss you than any one, 'Gene, but I feel that kisses should only be for husbands."

She blushed at this word. She hurried on past it.

"But I'd just as soon right here. So here is one for you and here is another."

She made two very small crosses. It didn't seem a silly thing to do.

"So now I hope you'll forgive me if you thought I was cross with you. 'Gene, dear, there are so many things — new things that I never thought of until this minute — that I want to say to you."

She puckered up her brows and considered hard a moment. She didn't wish to hurt him with suspicions and yet her mother heart drove her on. He

was going away from home among strange men, and perhaps some of them would not be good men. He was such a boy that he needed a warning. She did n't know about what exactly, but every one agreed that a boy in going out into the world was sure to be tempted by many things. Perhaps, if she said just a word, it might help him.

She began again,

“'Gene, dear, I want you to be a good boy. I know you will, but I thought, perhaps, if you knew that I particularly wanted you to be, it might help. If you just remember that wherever you are or whatever you are doing I shall be very near you. Let me go with you everywhere you go. And if you have storms at sea I'd like to be in them too. No matter how hard the winds blow or how big the waves are I'd like to be holding onto your arm. You won't mind, will you? I feel that I'll always be safe everywhere if only I can hold onto your arm.

“It seems queer to be saying these things to you. Yet when I'm writing them they don't seem queer. Only yesterday you were just 'Gene Page and to-day — why, you are 'Gene, my 'Gene! Yesterday I thought of you every now and then as just a boy. Now you are n't a boy any more — except my boy. And that's a different kind somehow. Your mother must be very proud of you, 'Gene. I shall go over and see her just as soon as I can. She will miss you too, I suppose, and we can talk about you. You must n't forget to write to her. If you write to me every day, you ought to write to her at least once a week. Now please remember this.



"I wish you could find time to go on with your studies. You were doing very well in your English and pretty well lately in your algebra. It would help you a lot when you get to be captain to know about those things. Won't it be fun when you come back in charge of your own ship? Will you wear a uniform? I think you would look very handsome in a uniform. But when you're a captain I shall go with you. And you will take me first to Rio de Janeiro. I shall follow you in the geography everywhere you go.

"And now I'll say good-night to you. I've always thought of you a little bit before going to sleep, but now I shall put you in my prayers. I hope you will get this before the ship sails for —"

She paused. Why, 'Gene had forgotten to give her his address! When he had walked away, he had said she need n't write to him. Her heart sank. She could never write him if she did n't know the name of his ship. The world went blank for a moment, and then her lips came together. She must catch him in the morning on his way to the station. She did not know when the train left, but she would get up very early and meet him on the road. After all, why had n't she thought of this before? She could even walk a little way with him. She could give him the letter herself and tell him not to open it until he reached Boston. At the possibility of seeing him again something of her old timidity returned. She was glad that she had thought of this,

but on the whole she would rather he did n't know all that she had said in this letter until he was in Boston. He would need it more then and it would come to him as a big surprise.

She scratched out the last half-finished line and closed the letter briefly.

"Now I'm going to sleep and when I wake up it will be to see you for a moment. God bless you, dear 'Gene.

"Your JULIE.

"P.S. I do! I do! I do!

"J. M."

She undressed quickly, blew out her light, and climbed into bed. For a few minutes her thoughts ran wild, but she was very tired after the strain of the last few hours and very happy over its outcome. Her eyes soon closed and she slept.

When she awoke, it was dawn. For a moment she lay with her eyes open and with the feeling that this new day was of deep importance to her without being able to recall how or why. Then, like sun through clouds, 'Gene's name came to her lips. She said it over and over again:

"'Gene, 'Gene, 'Gene."

Her eyes grew bigger and bigger as she realized all it meant to her. She was glad that as yet the room was dim. She needed the cool and the silence

and the gray to calm her pounding heart. She lay very still, not daring to move, feeling herself some new creature. Three times a woman thrills with new birth — once when she awakes to the knowledge of her love, once to the knowledge of her wifehood, once to the knowledge of her motherhood. Three times the world stands new created to her.

To Julie this realization came with virginal freshness. She had had no schooling in love. There had been no preparation even with 'Gene. It had come like a revelation. Even in the occasional queries she had put to herself during the winter she had not thought of love. Even when he had appeared at her window she had not thought of love. It was not until he himself had spoken the word, not until he had walked away from her, that she had grasped its meaning. Then and then alone had the many mysteries of the last few months been made clear.

The wizard of the East transmuted in his melting-pot the silver of the Orient to gold. A long yellow band lay along the horizon line. A light breeze rustled through the trees, making them sound as though they were shaking out their clothes. Then sleepily and hoarsely a cock tried his voice in the barnyard. It was answered by a low moo from the cows, a stamping from the horses, and a howl from a distant dog. For a few minutes then the world

again relapsed into sleepy silence. Julie rose to her elbow. The room was cold, but she did not feel the cold. It seemed broad day to her. As the cock gave his second call, she sprang from bed. She dressed herself hastily, but gave some care to her hair, laughing and blushing at herself in the mirror. By the time this was done the sky was gaudy with greens and trembling pinks, the barnyard was abroad, and the robins chirping busily.

She picked up her letter, hesitated a moment, and then without reading it thrust it into an envelope and marked it simply, “For 'Gene.” She threw a cape over her shoulders and crept down the hall and out the door. She heard the covers of the stove rattling in the kitchen and knew the Millers were up. But good fortune was with her and she escaped without being seen. By the time she made the road the sun was above the horizon and the dew over the valley below was rising to meet it. She hurried down the road and paused at the spot where she had stood with 'Gene last night.

She did not have long to wait. In a few minutes 'Gene came down the hill, but before he reached the Miller house he swung off the road into the field as though anxious not to be seen. She watched him keep behind the fringe of trees until well below the house and then come again into the

road only a few yards above her. He was dressed in a blue suit, wore a cap, and carried his baggage over his shoulder in an ordinary mealbag. He looked even bigger and stronger than last night. She saw him turn once or twice and glance back towards her room. She laughed softly to herself. Then suddenly she sprang out at him — like a tiger.

'Gene dropped his bag with as startled an expression as though she had really been a tiger.

"Julie!" he exclaimed.

She met his eyes without embarrassment. She met his eyes with the whole-hearted joy of a child.

"You did n't expect me, 'Gene?"

"Expect you?" he faltered. "I should say not." He stared at her as though he could not as yet realize her presence.

"You're glad to see me, 'Gene?"

"Glad? Why, Julie, I could n't sleep all night thinkin' o' you."

"Oh, 'Gene!" she cried.

Then with lowered eyes she confessed:

"And thinking of you I slept soundly all night."

"Girls is diff'rent, I guess," he answered.

She was all huddled up in her cape, trying her best to breathe normally, trying her best to think clearly. But it was difficult to talk or even think in the joy of being near him again.

“You came to say good-by to me?” he asked.

“Yes, 'Gene.”

Uncertainly he took a step nearer. She did not move. He took another. She raised her head with a smile. He seized her in his big arms.

“Julie! Julie, you *do* love me?”

“Yes, 'Gene,” she answered.

“Oh, Lord, why did n't you tell me last night?”

“I — I did n't know until after you 'd gone.”

“And now you tell me just when I can't stop.”

Her head was nestling against his coat. He stepped back so that he could see her eyes. They made him dizzy.

“I've half a mind to miss the boat for you,” he said hoarsely.

“No! No!” she protested.

The thought made her half afraid again. Her courage seemed dependent upon his going.

“I — I must n't stop you,” she hurried on.  
“Here, 'Gene. This is for you.”

She thrust the letter into his hand and looked about to run. He took the letter, but with it he took her again.

“It does n't seem as though I *could* go now. I don't want to go to sea now.”

She drew away in wonder.

"Don't want to go to sea?" she exclaimed.

"I want to stay here."

"But you want to go to India and to Rio —"

"I don't care a hang about India now."

"Why, 'Gene!" she cried.

For a second the cloak of romance with which she enveloped him dropped. She saw him as plain 'Gene Page again. It was as though she had awakened from a dream.

He sensed the change. He drew her to him passionately.

"Of course I really want to go. But you —"

He pressed her head back by main strength and kissed her lips. For a moment she stood trembling beneath the embrace, her eyes closed. When at length he freed her, she was moaning.

"Oh, 'Gene! 'Gene!" she whispered.

She covered her face with her hands.

"I could n't help it, could I? We're engaged now, Julie. Just as soon 's I come back we'll be married. You'll wait, you'll wait for me?"

She lifted her eyes again to his.

"Why, of course," she answered.

"I b'lieve you. I would n't b'lieve another girl on earth, but I b'lieve *you*."

"You'd believe any girl after that, would n't you?"

“I dunno ’s I would,” he laughed uneasily.

“And now,” she urged him, “you must hurry. Oh, ’Gene, somehow I feel that I want to see your mother. As soon as you go I think I’ll go back to her.”

“Mother?” he exclaimed, not understanding.

“I must tell her right away.”

He frowned.

“See here, Julie,” he answered, “let’s keep this a secret. Let’s not tell any one.”

“Not tell?”

“I’d feel better if you did n’t.”

“But why, ’Gene?”

“Just to please me. Won’t you promise?”

“You really want me to promise that?”

“Yes,” he answered determinedly.

“All right,” she answered soberly, “I’ll promise.”

“It’ll save you a lot of questions,” he reassured her. “And now —”

He tried to kiss her again, but she held her head away.

“No, ’Gene. Not again until you come back.”

“You’re queer,” he answered. “Can I shake hands with you before I get back?”

She held out her hand, and as he took it she placed her other above his.



"God bless you, 'Gene," she said. "God bless you, 'Gene, and keep you a good boy."

He seized her roughly and kissed her again and again. She began to cry.

He picked up his bag and for a second stood before her.

"Go," she pleaded, "go now, please."

"Good-by, Julie," he answered lightly.

So he went down into the morning mist of the valley and she climbed back to the sun on the hilltop.

## CHAPTER VI

### *On the Road to Mandalay*

'GENE took the fifteen miles to St. Croix on that April morning with as little effort as every day he walked to school. He was seeing life through new eyes. He was now a sailor, with all the wide world ahead of him. He even walked with a certain rolling gait which he understood to be peculiar to sea-faring men. The old landmarks which were as familiar to him as the furnishings of his room at home now looked fresh and new as though he were a foreigner. He imagined himself already in the Andes, and swung along as carelessly as though the farm were already miles behind him.

He made long circuits through the fields at every house, and when within sight of the village left the highway altogether. He had his reasons for not wishing to be seen. He had told no one at home save Julie of his journey. For one thing he disliked scenes and knew his mother would cry about it; for another he liked the mystery of a stealthy departure; and for another he was still sufficiently afraid of

his father to hesitate about disobeying him openly. He knew the latter would object. Captain Barclay, glad enough to get for his ship husky youngsters fresh from the country, had made the matter easy by sending him his ticket to Boston and five dollars in advance on his wages. 'Gene made up his mind that he would n't write home until safe at sea.

When finally he came down through the grove of oaks back of the wooden station, he was still an hour ahead of time. He selected a comfortable spot in the sun, and drawing out a corncob pipe filled it with tobacco he had pilfered from his father. He lighted it, and lying back with his head on his gunny sack smoked with lazy content. His thoughts were all of the future. He anticipated the ride to Boston, the meeting with the captain, and his life on the high seas. To Julie he never gave a thought until in putting back his pipe he found her letter. Then he tore this open and read it through with a smile of deep satisfaction playing around his handsome mouth. A girl to leave behind him was the last touch needed to make his adventure perfect. If he had doubted the sincerity of Julie's love before, he found it impossible after reading this gentle epistle, so warm and so direct from her eager young heart. Had he known all this letter contained, he would

have kissed her a hundred times. It was clear she had deceived him with her coyness.

The shrill whistle of the approaching train brought him to his feet. He swung his sack over his shoulder and hurried down to the platform. He managed to get into the train without giving the usual station loafers a chance to question him, and settled back into the corner of the last car. He had never seen so many well-dressed men and women in his life. He himself was in his Sunday clothes, but they now appeared decidedly work-a-day. He noticed too that the hands of the men were very white compared to his; that their shoes were shined while his own were oiled. There was not a detail which escaped him and which he did not tuck away in his mind for future use.

But the passing scenery also appealed to him. He had never before been any farther from home than a drive to some neighboring towns to dances or to the autumn fairs. The train had n't proceeded an hour before he was on ground as unfamiliar as any in South America. He glued his eyes to the window and before he knew it was in Bangor. He had a wait of an hour here, but he did n't dare move from his seat in the station for fear of losing the train. He was n't happy until once aboard it again and speeding towards Boston. He had his first

glimpse of the ocean on the way and his first sniff of salt air. It was like wine to him. It set aflame every dream he ever had. He had thought of the sea as differing only in size from the little ponds around home, but even the brief pictures from the car window were enough to show him that this water was something entirely distinct. Its age impressed him most of all. The slimy green piles beneath the wharves suggested centuries, while the lakes were as though made from day to day. Even the anchored schooners looked venerable and hoary. So did the shore line with its clutter of decaying things. He could not yet realize its size, although the ponderous waves which pounded against the sands at Old Orchard were clumsy giants alongside the dainty patting ripples about the old millpond. The roar of them was as bewildering as the first boom of cannon to a new recruit. It did not frighten him, but it made the journey seem less the jaunty affair it had appeared while he was walking over the hills that morning.

He was whirled through Portsmouth and then on through a half-dozen smaller cities which looked to him revoltingly dirty. Smoke-stained and grimy, they lowered his spirits. Still the streets packed with life as on a circus day at home revived him somewhat. He studied eagerly all the comers into

the car. He noticed particularly the women. They all seemed beautiful. They were of finer texture than those at home — with the exception of Julie. She could compare with any of them except that the latter seemed much gayer.

The train pulled through a stretch of factory buildings, then through what looked like the heart of the city itself, then pounded over wooden trestles just above the green water, then through a desolate half-mile of freight yards, and then slowing down hauled into a dark covered building. 'Gene heard the brakeman shout:

“Boston. All change. Do not leave any articles or packages in the car.”

He seized his bag and jumped to his feet. He shouldered his way to the door in fear he would not be off in time. Before the train fairly came to a standstill he forced his way down the steps and was on the platform. He stopped a second to take his bearings, but from behind and on all sides he was surrounded by a nervous crowd of men and women who in their turn forced him on. He allowed himself to be swept through the iron gates to the main station, where he was left stranded like an old log below a dam. They went on past him, laughing, chattering, sure and confident in their movements. Each apparently had his fixed destination and cared

not a jot whether he had one or not. He had at first resented their interference in forcing him along with them willy nilly, but now as they ignored him he watched them enviously. He was timid about asking questions, but finally ventured up to a policeman with the address the captain had furnished him and inquired the way. The policeman gave a curt direction which sufficed to get 'Gene out of the station, at any rate. Here the clatter of the cars and the heavy rumble of traffic over cobble-stones confused him. He inquired again and received another direction. By this method he reached in the course of an hour Atlantic Avenue.

He had not eaten all day. He passed a dozen restaurants with food temptingly displayed, and this so whetted his appetite that he felt faint. The boat did not sail until the next morning, although he was supposed to be aboard that night. He had plenty of time and decided to fortify himself for the ordeal of meeting the captain by a square meal. He shuffled slowly by one place after another without being able to make up his mind to venture in. They all seemed far too luxurious for him. The lights and crowd embarrassed him — more than ever since he had seen several people turn and smile at him and his bag. The chances are that he would have ended by giving up his dinner had he not

caught the eyes of a young waitress resting upon him. She stood looking at him in aimless fashion and yet with something distinctly friendly about her too. At sight of his bag she had started to smile like the others, but when she saw his face the smile of mockery had changed into another kind of smile. This single touch of friendliness was all the encouragement his hunger needed. He walked through the door. At this she turned and hurried away. He stood there awkwardly looking around, not knowing what to do next with this support removed, and might have gone out again if she had n't turned back. Her eyes had grown curious. She studied his face shrewdly and then came towards him.

"Can I get suthin' to eat here?" he inquired, politely removing his cap.

She liked that act of courtesy.

"If you've got the price," she answered with caution, but not unkindly.

"I've got five dollars," he replied.

"That would last you a week in this joint," she answered. "Sit down."

She waved her hand towards a vacant table. He placed his bag beside him, stuffed his cap into his pocket, and waited.

"What'll you have?" she asked. "There's the bill o' fare."



He took up the card soiled by the marks of many greasy fingers, and looked it over. He was so self-conscious with her standing there beside him that he could n't read a word. So a full minute passed.

"Well?" she inquired.

"I dunno," he confessed.

"How'd ham and eggs hit you?" she asked.

"Can I get that here?"

"Sure can."

"Then I'll have that," he decided with a smile.

She disappeared to the other end of the room with a movement which seemed to involve nothing but her feet. He heard her shout, "Two mediums on ham." She collected a napkin, fork and knife, a glass of water, and a plate of butter, and distributed these into place with a single motion. He watched her from the corner of his eye.

She was not a pretty girl. She was tall and rather thin, and her face did not have much color. She was dressed in faded black and wore a white apron not over clean. Her blond hair was done in some wonderful pompadour fashion and was not unattractive. Neither were her brown eyes. The fact that in describing her one was forced to use negatives was, on the whole, significant. On the other hand, no one could do Bella justice by merely cataloguing her features. This would by no means

account for her popularity with her customers — a popularity, however, which never extended beyond the threshold of the small restaurant.

The thing that distinguished her from the other two girls, who were much prettier and younger, was a smile of good-humored cynicism which flashed to her thin lips and lighted her whole face at moments when the other girls usually responded with coquettish grins. Safe behind the barrier of her plainness, she allowed herself a freedom of intercourse with men which had left her very wise and self-reliant. Men had a habit of confiding in her when she would allow it. She listened, if at all, with mingled scorn and amusement at their petty vanities and intrigues. She knew men as a trained nurse knows men. It was not often that they furnished her with such a refreshing change as she found in 'Gene. Her second glance assured her that the boy was new to his surroundings, and that he had not come to town with any of the blatant self-confidence which accompanied most rustics. There was nothing artificially fresh about him. He was as genuine as new milk.

'Gene continued to feel her friendliness. In a few minutes he was at ease in her presence and ventured to look around. There were two or three other men in the room, and behind the counter to the right

the proprietor picked his teeth with bland indifference. The walls were ornamented with signs proclaiming the price of a dish of pork and beans, fish hash, small steaks, and ham and eggs. Even these announcements impressed him with their distant apathy. They were stuck up there in a "Take it or leave it" spirit in marked contrast to the friendly advertisements in the village store.

With one eye on the boss, Bella ostentatiously wiped off the top of the bare wooden table before him.

"Just come down?" she inquired.

"Yes," he answered shyly.

"Where goin'?"

"Goin' to sea," he replied.

"Good place for you," she answered.

"I'm goin' to India," he told her.

"The farther the better," she replied with a nod.

He did n't understand her logic, but before he had time to question, a sepulchral voice from the dumb waiter sent her sailing off like a small tug. She returned with his ham and eggs and a couple of rolls. The sight of food drove all other thoughts from his mind, and he began to eat at once. Another customer entered with an easy nod at Bella and seated himself at the next table. A second one came in,

glanced quickly at 'Gene and his bag, and seated himself opposite the boy. He was a broad-shouldered fellow with a very red face and very small eyes. The glands below his eyes were swollen. He leaned good-naturedly across the table with a low husky whisper.

"Hello, pard."

'Gene looked up.

"Hello," he answered.

"Them ham and eggs looks good to me," the man continued with easy familiarity. "How d' they taste?"

"Fine," answered 'Gene.

The man leaned farther towards him.

"Yer would n't stake a poor feller who ain't had nothin' to eat all day to a lay-out like that, would yer?"

"You mean you hain't got no money?"

"That's 'bout the size of it," answered the man.

A tramp was never turned away from the Page house, and 'Gene himself was naturally generous with money.

"An' ye want me to buy your supper?"

"You're on, old man."

"Of course I will," 'Gene answered heartily.

The fellow turned instantly, and raising his arm

snapped his fingers. Bella looked up, frowned, and ignored the summons. But the proprietor rapped sharply on his desk, and she was forced to obey.

"Bring me ham an' eggs like me fren's," he commanded.

Bella glanced sharply at 'Gene and back again at the newcomer.

"How long since he's been your friend?" she demanded in a low voice.

The man scowled.

"You tend your business an' I'll tend mine," he warned.

In the course of the meal 'Gene found a real companion in this stranger. It seemed that he too was a sailor and had even had in mind seeking Captain Barclay of the Lillie K. in search of a berth on this very trip.

"Come with me an' I'll interdooce ye," 'Gene suggested.

"I dunno but what I'll take yer up on that," nodded the man. "I useter know the cap'n well, but maybe he would n't 'member me. I've been sorter down on my luck lately. M' name's Johnson — Ben Johnson."

"Mine's Page — 'Gene Page."

"Well now, 'Gene, what d' ye say we pay up our little recknin' here and hoist anchor? I'll pilot ye

to the ship, you 'll interdooce *me*, and we 'll both hev a talk with the cap'n."

"All right," 'Gene agreed readily. "How much do I owe?"

"I guess fifty cents will let us out. Jus' ye whistle fer the little dame — who accordin' to my notions is a fresh un."

'Gene obeyed literally. He whistled as he would call a dog. Bella heard and turned scarlet to the roots of her hair. For a wonder, however, she did not show her resentment when she came up. She took 'Gene's five-dollar bill.

"Two?" she asked.

'Gene nodded. She returned with his change, and 'Gene picked up his bag. The stranger took his arm in brotherly fashion and escorted him to the door.

Bella watched the two with curious concern. This was none of her business, and she was not in the habit of interesting herself in the affairs of her customers. She had observed the inception of worse conspiracies than this without more than a smile. And yet she hated to see this big blond countryman go out in such company without at least a warning. For a second she stood helplessly watching them. Then with some color in her face she stepped forward.

"Say, mister," she called just as they were going out the door.

Both men turned.

"You," she nodded, looking directly at 'Gene.

"I guess I made a mistake in your bill."

"Mistake?" stammered 'Gene, coming back.

The other also started to return, but before he reached his companion's side she said to 'Gene in a low voice:

"I'd shake my friend if I was you."

She turned without a word. As she passed the proprietor, the latter winked significantly.

For the second time that day Bella felt the hot blood flame to her cheeks. With a stiff upward jerk of her head she went off about her work.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Lady with the Pompadour*

**I**T seems there was some difficulty in locating the Lillie K. Mr. Johnson, however, did his best. With 'Gene in tow he wandered up and down Atlantic Avenue until dark and asked every friend he met if he knew where Captain Barclay was or if he had seen the Lillie lying alongside any of the wharves. To a man they shook their heads, but suggested to a man that a mug o' beer might possibly refresh their memory on the matter. In this way 'Gene purchased some five or six mugs for all hands except himself — Mr. Johnson being invariably included in the refreshing process. The latter became increasingly friendly and increasingly talkative. He insisted upon walking arm and arm with the boy, and finally begged to relieve him of his bag, although the latter protested at this unusual act of courtesy.

“Not a word, pard,” Johnson cut him off with a magnanimous wave of his hand. “You’re putting up the cash, so I’ll do the work. Fren’ly act fer a fren’. Share an’ share alike is my motto.”



But within the next half-hour Johnson began to feel the weight of his burden. He tapped 'Gene on the shoulder.

"I've got an idee. An' here we are right 'long-side my fren' Murphy's. Le's go in, sit down an' talk it over."

To tell the truth, 'Gene was nothing loth. His long walk in the morning, taken with the excitement of the day and his long tramp since leaving the restaurant, had left even him leg-weary. They passed through the swinging doors of Mr. Murphy's establishment and seated themselves at one of the small tables beyond the bar. Johnson ordered two mugs of musty.

"Better drink up," he advised 'Gene as the ale arrived. "It's a sorter tonic. It'll do yer good."

'Gene was thirsty enough to sip the ale. It was cool and pleasantly bitter. He gulped down the rest of it with a relish.

"Have another," suggested Johnson hospitably, as he finished his own mug.

Two more appeared upon the table as though by magic.

"Now look-a-here, pard," Johnson began confidentially, "if you asks me wot the trouble is with that there ship, I'm goneter tell yer. I'm goneter tell yer the cap'n has played yer dirt. You asks my

opinion an' I'm goneter give it straight — the cap'n has sailed without yer."

He nodded wisely, raised the mug of musty to his lips, emptied it, and nodded again as though after his drink he was more than ever convinced.

"Why would he want to do that?" inquired 'Gene, startled by the suggestion.

"I don't give no reasons 'cause I don't know no reasons," answered Johnson with truth, "but I says, knowin' the cap'n, that that's jus' wot he's gone and done."

"He paid my fare down here," said 'Gene, decidedly bewildered.

"Well — we hain't found him, have we? We hain't found him high *or* low. I've asked my fren's and they ain't seen him. Where is he then? I asks yer straight, where is he?"

'Gene swallowed the second mug of ale.

"I dunno," he answered.

It did n't seem to matter so much in here. It was warm and the lights were very brilliant. He felt a pleasant glow from the ale, and settling back stretched out his legs.

"I dunno an' I don't care," he decided.

"Spoke like a man," approved Johnson.

"I don't care an' I dunno," 'Gene added for emphasis.

"Right ye are."

Johnson crossed his elbows on the table.

"Now wot does a seafarin' man do wot's left ashore?" he asked.

The room was beginning to swim to 'Gene. Not much — but in a lazy sort of dance-tune fashion. His last remark had won such applause that he could think of nothing better than to repeat it.

"I don't care an' I dunno."

"Well, I know. They makes a night of it — that's wot they does. They says t' hell with poverty, bring 'long another herrin', herrin' in this case meanin' no more an' no less than another musty."

"Bring 'long six," 'Gene invited with a generous wave of his hand.

"One at a time, one at a time," Johnson cautioned.

But at that moment the waiter whispered in Johnson's ear.

"The boss says this don't go here," he warned.

"Very well," nodded Johnson. "Tell the boss fer me —"

"Cut it out," the waiter advised.

Johnson seized 'Gene's bag.

"Come on, ol' man. We'll go find some more fren's er mine."

'Gene rose sleepily. Johnson took his arm and they went out. They had n't walked a block before Johnson found his friends. They were an ugly, wicked-looking bunch and they led 'Gene unsteadily up a dark side street and proceeded at once to go through his pockets in a very businesslike manner. He was sober enough to resent this, but the group closed in on him. He tried to struggle, but they held him in their midst until they had taken all he had. The excitement sobered him at once. He turned to the nearest man and struck out. He caught the fellow in the face and the latter dropped like a log. Then followed chaos. 'Gene never knew what happened, but he found himself under a battering rain of blows. They came from in front, from behind, and on both sides. He covered his head with his arms and staggered about blindly. Then in sheer desperation he seized one of the thugs about the body. The others, taking the alarm, ran. He gripped this fellow about the back and contracted his muscles. The man caved in before the bear hug like a thing of straw. Together they fell to the sidewalk, 'Gene on top. In a frenzy he began to beat the man's head against the brick paving. The latter gasped for mercy.

"Fer Gawd's sake," he pleaded, "let me go. The cops 'll pinch us all."

'Gene let him go more because he was tired of his task than anything else. The man made his feet and staggered off into the night.

When 'Gene picked himself up, he was alone and quite sober. He was breathing hard. He felt first in his pockets. He found nothing but Julie's letter. He looked around for his bag. It was gone. Penniless and sore, he found himself in a black pit of a street. For a second an awful wave of homesickness swept over him. It brought a lump to his throat and he felt like crying. He sat down on the curbing with his head in his hands and tried to think. And at this moment the only face that came to comfort him was that of the girl with the pompadour in the restaurant. He remembered her advice and cursed himself for not following it. And now the ship had gone.

He rose and stumbled towards a sputtering arc light at the end of the alley. This brought him within sight of the traffic of the street up and down which he had walked with Johnson. His only chance seemed in finding that man again. He hurried on, and for five minutes stood on the corner scanning every face. They were ugly faces — brutal faces. But more than that, they were indifferent faces. There was n't anything about him now to tempt even a thug. He had no bag, and after

his wrestle on the sidewalk his personal appearance was not such as to make him look a victim worth any one's trouble. A woman or two passed him, at first with a smirk and then after closer inspection with a raucous laugh. Even at that, several of them turned uncertainly a third time for a further look at him. He was no ordinary tramp. He still had his sturdy six feet of height, his strong firm body, his clean face and golden hair to recommend him to the attention of those interested in anything but business.

But those who did stop invariably made him so uncomfortable that he always moved away from them. In this fashion he passed a couple of hours, and catching sight of a clock learned that it was after ten. The question of lodging for the night, the question of the morrow, loomed up with terrifying insistence. He gave up all hope of finding Johnson, and with that lost all hope of everything. At this point his mind reverted again to the girl with the pompadour. He felt that it would be good just to set eyes on her again. He could n't remember in which direction the restaurant lay, but he walked first to the right for the matter of a mile and then retraced his steps and walked about the same distance the other way. Then he came upon the friendly window. His

heart leaped with joy as, peering through the cloudy glass, he saw her there.

The place was empty except for the proprietor and the girl. 'Gene saw the latter remove her apron, and concluded she must be through for the day. He withdrew a little to one side of the door and waited. He had not yet made up his mind even to speak to her. Coming from the country where the friendly custom still prevailed of greeting every passer-by, he saw no offense in it, but he was ashamed of confessing to her his misfortune. And then again he did not know what good it would do if he did speak to her. He had no intention of asking alms. It was not that he wanted. He wished merely to hear her voice. He grasped at her as the only human being in this cityful to whom he could even say so much as Good-evening.

Dressed in a black sack coat and a black straw sailor hat, she came out. She looked neither to the right nor the left, but started across the street with a very businesslike walk. His heart sank, and his courage failed him. He did not dare stop her, and yet as she vanished out of sight he felt with double force his own loneliness. His throat pained him again and he saw blurry. He could n't let her disappear like that. He must say something to her. He must let her know that he was still living. He

must let her know that he had n't caught the ship. Even if she only laughed at him for it he would feel relieved that some one here knew of his existence.

He hurried across the street, scanning the crowd eagerly. He could not find her. Being without a destination, he was unconsciously swept on by the current. He was taken down a side street towards the ferry. Here the crowd was massed a little. He skirted the edge of the half-hundred waiting people and near the closed gate he saw her face again. He pushed his way to her side. She saw him coming, gave a start, and shrank back. He realized her fear and stopped in his tracks. He did n't wish to worry her. Of course she did n't know anything about him. He caught sight of his coat beneath the light above his head and saw that it was covered with dirt. He could n't blame any one for not wanting to be seen with such a tramp as he was.

The ferry bell clanged; the gates were opened and the crowd surged in. He stood immovable and allowed them to sweep past. He was shoved this way and that. He heard a dozen oaths growled at him. He did not care. She was lost again in the eddy, and now nothing mattered. He turned away. Then he heard her voice.

"Well," she exclaimed cheerfully, "you got  
..



His lean face so beamed with joy that her eyes narrowed immediately.

"What for you follerin' me?" she demanded.

"I—I dunno," he answered, "I did n' mean —"

"What you think I am?" she challenged before he had time to finish.

He blushed like any schoolboy.

"You're the only one I knew here," he excused himself.

"Well, you don't know me if you want'er git fresh, see?"

"Fresh?" he stammered.

She came nearer and looked sharply up into his eyes. She almost stood on tiptoe.

"Don't make no mistake 'bout me," she warned.

"Seems though I was n't doin' nothin' but make mistakes," he answered.

She relaxed her tension.

"What did he do — clean you out?"

"Took my bag an' money," he confessed.

"A dirty trick," she nodded, "but I s'pose you'd have lost 'em sooner or later. Did n't he leave you nothin'?"

"No," he answered.

"Where's your ship?"

"Gone, I s'pose."

"D' you know for sure?"

He shook his head.

"We could n't find her."

"I s'pose not. I guess it's too late now for you to git aboard to-night, even if you did find her."

"An' she sails early to-morrow," he added helplessly.

She waited for him to continue, but he was tongue-tied.

"What you goin' to do?" she demanded.

"I dunno," he answered.

She studied him shrewdly another moment. Then she asked:

"What you want o' me?"

"Nothin'," he answered.

She laughed harshly at that.

"Don't jolly me along," she insisted; "out with it like a man."

"Honest, I don't want nothin'," he replied; "I jus' wanted to speak to ye, that's all."

Now that he stood beside her and saw that her head did n't even reach his shoulders, it seemed more and more absurd that he should have need of her. In contrast with her black sack her face looked pale and thin.

She did n't believe him yet. She made a motion to turn away.

"If that's all," she concluded, "then I guess I'll beat it for home."

"Good-night," he said without hesitation.

She paused once more.

"What *are* you goin' to do?" she asked again.

"I dunno."

"I s'pose you know that if you hang round here all night you'll git pinched?"

"Pinched?"

"Arrested."

"Well, I can't help it, can I?" he answered weakly.

She frowned.

"I'll bet if I was your size I'd help it," she replied.

"How?"

"Why, I'd — I'd —"

When she stopped to think of it, what would she do? What could he do? And yet it was ridiculous for this bulk of a man to stand there as helpless as a lost child. She frowned again. Then she laughed. Somehow he made her feel as though it was her duty to take him home and see him safely tucked in for the night.

"Hain't you got no friends at all?" she demanded with a smile.

"Only Mr. Johnson an' he's —"

"Oh, don't!" she broke out. "For Lawd's sake, don't! They oughtnter let you leave home without a nurse."

She meant no insult, but the words cut him to the quick.

"Don't you worry 'bout me," he answered.

"Don't worry 'bout you?" she retorted. "Good Lawd, d'you think I can help it? D'you think I can sleep thinkin' of you wanderin' 'round the streets like a kid what's lost his mother?"

"I'm all right," he answered surlily.

"Oh, yes, you're all right. You're fine and all right. You're the most all-right thing I ever seen. Now you come along with me and I'll find a place for you to curl up those long legs of yourn."

Without giving him time to answer she led the way back to Atlantic Avenue. He could n't do anything but follow. Up one street and down another she hurried him, looking for all the world like a small tug towing an ocean liner to its berth. When she stopped, it was before a house bearing the sign "Beds; twenty-five cents." She reached beneath her overskirt and drew out a purse. She handed him a quarter.

"Here," she said imperiously, "take this and go in there and get a bed."

He drew back his hands.

"I can't take money from a girl," he answered.

"Take it," she cried, impatiently shoving it into his hand, "take it. Don't make me hang 'round here all night. Come back and tell me if you find an empty."

"But —"

She placed her hand on his big arm and shoved him forward.

"For Lawd's sake, don't stand here chewin' the rag."

He went upstairs and put his question to the man behind the desk.

"Sure," answered the latter.

He started back.

"Where goin'? This way."

"Just a minute," answered 'Gene; "I've gotter see my friend."

She was waiting in a shadow.

"All right?" she questioned.

"Yes," answered 'Gene. "An' — say I can't thank you — I —"

"Cut it out," she answered. "Look me up at the restaurant in the mornin'."

"Won't ye let me see you to the boat?"

The question pleased her. It was not the courtesy of one bred to courtesy. It expressed simply an honest desire to protect her. Even after she had

paid his lodging for the night, he was still the man — still, with his big body, the protector.

“No,” she answered in a voice grown tender, “I don’t take no chances on your gettin’ lost again.”

“You’ve been mighty good to me.”

“Good-night,” she said.

He held out his hand. She hesitated and then took it. For a moment she let it rest there with a wistful sort of smile. Then she suddenly withdrew it and without another word hurried off.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Those He Left Behind*

'GENE'S departure was not discovered until noon of the day he left. In the morning it was thought that he had merely gone off without his breakfast, but later in the day, the mother becoming anxious, Nat went down to the little red school to make sure. He met Julie coming up the hill alone.

When she saw him, she stared at him as at a ghost.

"I — I thought for a moment you were 'Gene," she explained as soon as she recovered her breath.

"Is n't 'Gene at school?" he asked.

"At school?" she answered in surprise. "Why, don't you know? He's gone!"

"Gone where?"

"To sea. He heard last night from Captain Barclay and left this morning."

She gave the information weakly, as though feeling it were only vain repetition, but she had no sooner spoken than she gathered that it was, after all, real news.

"Did n't he tell you? Did n't he tell his mother?"

"No," he answered slowly, "but he must have told you."

"He did," she admitted, growing uneasy under his steady gaze.

"Well," he said, "if he's gone that's the end of it."

Personally he was glad of it. It seemed to clear up matters all round, but he was honestly surprised that 'Gene had shown courage enough to go.

"Nat," she said suddenly, "I must see your mother."

"All right," he answered.

"And — I wish to see her alone."

"All right."

He walked back up the hill with her, and his heart beat faster merely by being at her side. Her cheeks were even rosier than usual and her eyes snapped with excitement. At the barn he turned aside and she went on to the house.

At sight of Julie, Mrs. Page began to pluck nervously at her apron. She had learned what the sudden appearance of some one outside the family generally meant. Her thin face grew passive, almost blank, as she waited for what was to come. Julie stepped forward and took her hand.



"Don't be frightened, Mrs. Page," she began gently. "I'm not bringing very bad news."

"It's 'bout 'Gene?" stammered the mother.

"Yes," nodded Julie. "You come inside and let me tell you all about him."

The little woman suffered herself to be led into the kitchen. She sank down in a chair without removing her eyes from Julie. She waited like one who expects the worst. The girl felt like kneeling at her feet. She had always liked this mother, but now, as the mother of this new 'Gene, Mrs. Page took on a glory that was almost sacred. She gave the girl her first real vision of the wonder and mystery of motherhood. Julie's own mother had never made her feel this as now did the mother of 'Gene. It was hard to be forced to conceal the great joy they had in common over 'Gene.

"I don't know why 'Gene did n't tell you," Julie began. "I know he meant to tell you, but I suppose he — he thought it might be easier if he wrote."

"Wrote?" questioned the mother. "Then 'Gene has gone away?"

The mother eyes looked so anxious that the girl was frightened. She could n't understand. She herself had not been frightened. She herself had been glad he was going. 'Gene would n't have seemed truly 'Gene without this big adventure in prospect.

"Don't look like that," pleaded Julie. "Why, he's only gone to sea! 'Gene has only gone to sea."

"To sea!"

"To India and to South America," Julie ran on in her endeavor to place it in its really attractive light. "He had a wonderful opportunity. He's going with Captain Barclay and he sails to-night. Oh, he'll see the whole world before he comes back."

Her own eyes flashed with enthusiasm, but Mrs. Page raised her apron to her face and began gently to sob. Julie placed her hand upon the sagging shoulders. She could n't understand why 'Gene's mother should feel so sorrow-stricken. She had expected her to be very proud of the boy. She had expected her to look forward, as she did, to the time when he should come back tanned and stalwart and rich. She concluded that she was weeping because 'Gene had not said good-by. She frowned. He should have done that. It was thoughtless of him not to have.

"I think — I think he did n't tell you because he did n't wish to pain you at parting," Julie apologized for him.

"He's gone! He's gone!" moaned the mother.

"But he's gone to sea," exclaimed the girl, as though this brightened up the whole adventure.

"He's gone to make his fortune. Why, he's going

to Rio de Janeiro. And he's going to India. And he said he would get some tigers."

This fact, to be sure, had n't put much heart into Julie herself, but she thought that perhaps the mother, being of hardier stuff, might appreciate the opportunity even as 'Gene had. But Mrs. Page only began to rock to and fro, as though this were quite the end of the boy. Julie kept her hand on the mother's shoulder and without being able to say more felt her own spirits sink. In spite of all the arguments she brought forth to herself to excuse 'Gene, she felt keenly that in going after this fashion he had done something unworthy of himself. He had n't been quite direct. He ought to have confided in her anyway that his family did not know of his plans. If he had done that, she would have made him return and tell them. She determined to scold him for this in her next letter.

"Oh, my boy!" moaned the mother. "Oh, my darling 'Gene!"

Julie stooped and kissed the white hair.

"Can't you just think of when he's coming back?" she whispered. "It will be almost before we know it. Can't you think of that?"

Mrs. Page shook her head.

"It's easy enough to talk when he ain't your own," she sobbed.

Julie started back. For a second she resented the speech. Before she quite recovered herself the kitchen door opened and Mr. Page strode in. His face was hard as flint.

"Nat says the boy's gone to sea," he growled.

Mrs. Page did n't even look up.

"What fer you cryin'?" he demanded.

"He's gone!" she repeated.

The father leveled his hard eyes first upon his wife and then upon Julie.

"Serves him right," he answered. "It may knock a little sense into him."

"Mr. Page!" gasped Julie.

He faced her. He waited. She did not reply.

"Serves him right," he repeated and strode out of the room.

Julie glanced at Mrs. Page who had now stopped crying.

"Ef he'd only let me pack his clothes and git his things ready. I don't b'lieve he tuk his flannels."

"He — he had a bag with him," said Julie with some confusion.

"I'm goin' right up to his room this minute an' see what he did take," declared Mrs. Page.

She hurried out and left the girl standing there. Julie was disappointed. She felt almost like an intruder. Here in 'Gene's own home she had been

treated like an outsider. But as she stood alone for a minute, this feeling vanished before a warm glow of content from within which mastered her even as the kitchen clock on the mantel over the stove seemed to subdue all other sounds in the music of its own ticking. This was 'Gene's home, and everything in it was associated in some way with him. How many times his eyes must have rested on that scarred old clock face; how many times his lips must have touched the tin dipper hanging over the wooden sink; how many times his fingers must have grasped the iron lifter on the stove. Year after year he had looked at the drab-painted boards which sheathed this room, and at the yellow-bound Farmer's Almanac hanging by a string from the mantel. He had sat in these chairs with the painted grapes on the backs. The red tablecloth and the dishes upon the table set for luncheon and the cupboard by the side of the sink and the tin dishpan over it — even those things, because they had been the setting of his daily life, brought him nearer to her. In giving herself up to this thought she almost saw and felt him. She heard his steps coming through the woodshed. She saw him open the kitchen door.

But it was Nat who entered — not 'Gene.

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Next Best*

DAY after day Julie sat by the side of the road after supper and watched for old Lyman Chase, who on his return from work brought back with him from the Hio post-office the Miller and Page mail. Day after day he shook his head at her outstretched hand. She had expected 'Gene to write her at least a note from Boston before sailing, and for a week bolstered up her hopes with every conceivable theory which might send the letter astray. Then she computed how long it would take for the first mail to reach her from India, and being unable to cut it down below three months cried a little, and after that no longer waited by the side of the road.

But she waited everywhere else — even in school, where she went about her tasks mechanically with 'Gene's empty seat always before her. During recitations in physical geography her cheeks flamed hot and her eyes grew blurry until she could n't dis-

tinguish South America on the map from Africa. Across the face of every distant continent there was but one name printed, and that read 'GENE. April dragged into May, May into June, and every passing day left her more and more restless. She herself felt the wanderlust and began to resent the hills and mountains that hemmed her in.

She turned her eyes longingly towards the summit of Eagle. From there Nat had told her one could see some forty miles in every direction. If she could go up there and have one broad look, she felt that it would clear her brain and break the monotony of the waiting. Furthermore the physical effort would give some outlet to her pent-up emotions. Preferably she would have gone alone, but that was manifestly impossible. The alternative was Nat. She suggested it to him one day, and he fell in with the idea eagerly.

"It's a hard climb, but I guess ye can do it," he said.

"I — I don't suppose you can see the ocean from there, can you?" she asked wistfully.

He laughed.

"I'm pretty poor on geography, but I do know the ocean's about a hundred miles from here," he answered.

"Yes, yes," she admitted with a little laugh her-

self, "of course it is, but I did n't know but on a clear day —"

"There's a lake way off near the sky line that looks like the ocean," he said.

"Then we'll see that," she decided.

"If it's fair, we oughter see that," he agreed.

"And the next best thing to seeing the ocean is to see what looks like the ocean," she said.

"So?" he asked.

She grew confused, for her brain had instantly suggested an unexpected expansion of this idea; if one could n't see 'Gene was n't the next best thing to see some one who looked like 'Gene? Certainly ever since 'Gene's departure Nat had been more welcome to her than he had ever been before, though at times he irritated her to a point where she found it difficult to control her temper. He was apt to be unpleasantly direct, unpleasantly matter-of-fact. Furthermore she did n't like his attitude towards his brother. He refused to talk about him. His very silence was a slur upon 'Gene.

She turned away abruptly.

"I don't know as I'll go, after all," she announced.

"Any time you're ready," he said.

But as the weeks passed, the top of Eagle and the strip of blue on the horizon line which Nat had



mentioned, called to her with increasing insistence. She must do something to break the strain of this waiting.

It was the sixth week after 'Gene left and the week school ended that she informed Nat she would go on the following Saturday. She wrote her mother simply that she would not be home until Sunday. She did not tell of the proposed trip because she knew the latter would worry unnecessarily about it. She reached this decision only after an hour or so of uncomfortable thought. It was not her usual way of doing things. Even though her argument were a fair one, it is doubtful if she would have pursued it at all had it not been for 'Gene's example. It was true that she had not at all approved of the latter's conduct, but now it not only served to justify her, but her own resulting act served in a way to justify his. Here was a subtle bit of sophism that might puzzle the philosophers, but once she had worked it out it no longer disturbed her at all. To have done the same thing she disapproved of in 'Gene placed 'Gene in a much better light in her eyes. Furthermore she concealed her evasion from Nat. She knew the latter would think, of course, that she had consulted her parents about the adventure.

As a matter of fact it was unusual for a girl to

attempt the summit of Eagle Mountain. The mountain itself was high, its sides were precipitous, and there was no trail. It was a feat which even the hardy young men of the neighborhood boasted about. Nat himself was an exception. To him, who was more familiar with the woods than he was with the broad highways and whose stout legs had never yet failed him on any task he set them to do, the undertaking was only a holiday jaunt. Furthermore, his knowledge of the physical capabilities of women was slight. Even if his experience had convinced him they were a weaker sex, he still would not have applied the knowledge to Julie. He put no limitations of any sort upon her. He imbued her not only with all the dainty graces of her sex, but with all the resolute qualities of his own. He announced to his father on Friday evening that he would be gone all next day.

“Whar?” questioned the father.

“Up Eagle,” answered Nat.

“Fishin’?”

Nat had n’t thought of this, but it struck him as not a bad idea. There were several good trout streams on the way, and he might take along a line, some bait, and a frying-pan.

“Yes,” he answered.

His mother never questioned him about his trips,

and as he himself never thought of offering to any one information upon any subject which was n't asked, it happened that he left the house without conveying to his own family the fact that he was not going alone. This was wholly unpremeditated and wholly without design. Had he been asked, he would have answered frankly and without embarrassment. He had nothing to conceal.

It had been agreed that they should start early. It was somewhat impracticable to carry out Julie's first excited impulse to leave before sunrise, but he was up at four. Coming down into the cold kitchen, he kindled a fire while still the world was enveloped in the hush of night, though lighted by a dawn which revealed without warming. Sounds leaped out of the stillness until he seemed to hear them for the first time. The iron rattle of the stove covers, the thud of the wood in the wood-box, the tramp of his own feet which during the day were merged into the general clamor of life, now called attention to their individual personalities.

From the tin tobacco box on the mantel he took out two fish-lines, a half-dozen hooks, and a piece of sheet lead. He cut up enough salt-pork to fry the fish in, and packed these things, with the generous lunch his mother had put up, in the frying-pan. He added a small tin of coffee. He filled his pocket

with sulphur matches and made sure that he had his jack-knife. In the meanwhile he had cooked himself some coffee and boiled some eggs. He ate these with a relish and was ready to start at half-past five.

When he came out, the sun was well up in a cloudless blue sky, and the world was fairly awake. Julie met him before he reached the Miller house.

She was wearing a white shirtwaist with a low rolling collar which fitted loosely around her neck and throat. Her skirt was blue, and at his advice she had put on heavy shoes. A blue Tam-o'-Shanter set at a jaunty angle on her black hair, but before they had gone a mile she had given him this to add to his pack as well as the blue jacket which she had carried on her arm. As she trudged by his side, taking two steps to his one, she looked very body-free. She walked straight from her supple hips with an ease that made her movements seem to be without conscious effort.

They had two miles to go from the foot of the hill before they struck into the woods. From this point their course led them for another mile through a tangle of pine and fir with a scattering of young maples. An old wood road made the walking easy and kept them out of the undergrowth still wet with dew. The big sword-ferns which grew almost waist-

high along the way gave a tropical appearance to this part of the trail which her quick imagination seized upon instantly. She was no longer with Nat, who strode ahead of her. She threaded a tropical forest close upon the heels of 'Gene. Nat's broad shoulders and his light hair which curled a little about the neck furthered the illusion in startling fashion. From behind it was almost impossible to tell the brothers apart. With the two side by side Nat would have shown the heavier and clumsier, but at this moment it was 'Gene himself who walked ahead of her. She found herself responding to the fancy as heartily as though it were fact. In the sturdy swing of those long legs, in the easy poise of the big back, she saw 'Gene and 'Gene alone. She endowed Nat's every movement with that supple grace which so pleased her in 'Gene. He walked with the steadiness of an Indian, with a commanding self-assurance which left one nothing to do but follow. She felt that she could keep on behind that big frame indefinitely. He seemed to sweep fear aside as easily as he did the birch twigs which lay over the path. She could walk clear across South America if only he led.

Nat turned.

"Am I goin' too fast?" he asked.

She stared at him in so dazed a fashion for a mo-

ment that he grew anxious. She brought her hand to her heart. She had suddenly grown all out of breath.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I did n't know I was windin' ye."

"Go on, go on!" she pleaded.

"I'll slow down a bit," he answered.

"No, don't slow down!" she panted. "Don't speak! Don't do anything but keep on!"

He admired her pluck. He turned away, but chose a slower pace and made as much ado as possible about getting over the fallen logs.

Once she saw again only his back she recovered herself. It had been a shock when he faced her. As she followed on, she asked herself why. Why was he Nat and why was 'Gene 'Gene? A woman could not ask for kindlier or more trustworthy eyes than those into which she had stared when Nat turned. They were the same color as 'Gene's and much the same shape. And yet they were Nat's eyes and not 'Gene's eyes; they snatched her back from the romance of the tropics to the sober reality of the Maine woods. They brought her down from the clouds to the dull sober earth. They made her again a school teacher at Hio, with life rather a serious affair. They forced her to feel a certain kinship with the sober eyes of these round-shouldered bearers

of many children who trudged through the gray routine of their lives as farmers' wives.

In a few minutes the balmy perfume of the pines, the patches of golden sunlight on the shadowed moss, the ferns, and the whispering young birches had again carried her beyond herself. Once more she had crossed the ocean to foreign parts, and with the blood hot in her cheeks was trudging through the jungle about Rio de Janeiro, close upon the heels of 'Gene.

At Carson's brook they turned aside from the wood road. The borders of this ferocious little stream marked a path almost half-way to the summit, where it started from cool springs which bubbled up from the earth all summer long. At this point it was some three feet wide and carried a goodly volume of water. It was a mountain torrent in miniature, taking six-foot leaps with as much commotion as larger waters take sixty. It slid down slaty slopes as oilily as water over a mill-sluice, into dark pools three feet deep. During the centuries it had dug itself a bed through the broken granite for a considerable depth, with chasms at places quite five feet high. It was a baby Yosemite, bordered with moss and saplings and maiden-hair fern and many delicate flowers. In it small trout ranging from a few ounces to a half pound had the stream to themselves.

They stopped here to rest a moment before beginning the real ascent. Julie refused to allow him to make a birch-bark cup for her, but knelt on the bank and dipped her hands in the icy waters and drank man-fashion by bending her head to meet the stream lip to lip. This she did with excited laughter, ending by wetting her face to the fringe of her hair.

Nat could not imagine another woman who could fit so faultlessly into such a setting. He had been up here once before this spring alone. He had stopped almost at this very spot and had pictured Julie in just such a position. Even then he had been conscious of a certain danger, but now, with her there in the flesh within arm's length of him, he sat down with grim deliberation and kept his two hands clasped before him. She chattered on lightly, but he made few replies. Whenever he spoke, his own voice disturbed the beauty of the picture. He felt safer in merely looking on.

For the next hour they climbed very steadily, with scarcely a word between them. The path was both rough and steep. From time to time he turned and saw her scrambling behind him, with her face very red and her hair loose about the temples. He did n't dare look very long. The higher up he mounted, the farther he worked his way from the



settlement below, the more unfettered he felt. No comparisons were forced upon him up here, either for her or for him. In this clear air each stood for himself alone.

They continued along the bank of the stream, which grew smaller and smaller as they passed one tributary after another, until they reached its true source, the upper spring. Here again they rested. The spring itself was tucked away in a clump of denser foliage than that which lay outside its magic circle. Alders and birches pressed in close, as though to protect it. The waters, however, had kept clear a three-foot margin around it, green with grass and moss, so that once inside they were as sheltered as though in a tent. But it was a wonderful tent, richer in coloring than that of any Arab chieftain. Its roof was the blue of the sky overhead; its sides the white and silver of the young birches; its floor the emerald velvet of the tender moss. Near them a white-throated sparrow furnished music with his clear, plaintive whistle of "Pea, pea peabody, peabody, peabody." In tones sharp as flute notes, the bird voiced the sweet isolation of higher altitudes. Over all the sun shone down in soothing benison.

She was the first to break the golden silence.

"Nat," she asked, "do you think we'll ever get to the top?"

"I reckon," he answered. "But you won't find anything up there better 'n this."

She shook her head with a shy embarrassed laugh.

"You don't know what I'll find up there," she answered.

"I oughter know better 'n you 'cause I've been there."

"But you 've looked through your own eyes, Nat."

"O' course."

"And I — oh, I shall see the ocean and Rio de Janeiro and I don't know what all in that little strip of blue."

Nat glanced up at a ball of fluffy cloud which was scudding across the sky. She followed his eyes, saw it, and sprang to her feet.

"We must hurry," she exclaimed. "Suppose it should get cloudy?"

He smiled.

"No great harm done," he answered.

"But, Nat — Nat."

She grew petulant at the indifferent way he took this possibility. She had come up here for nothing else but to see the mock ocean. She stamped her foot.

"Hurry, Nat," she cried.

"Better take it easy," he replied.

She started off ahead of him, and he had nothing

to do but leave his Arab tent. He soon took the lead again, for the trail became increasingly difficult. The big pines changed to a stubbier growth of small firs. At the end of an hour the setting had changed again to a barren surface of rocks and bushes. The last stage was as steep as a flight of stairs, and he tried to take a slower pace, but she urged him on.

Julie during the last half-hour had been gripped by a strange superstition. She felt that unless she arrived to see that blue line unclouded by mist she would be responsible for some dreadful fate overhanging 'Gene — probably a tempest at sea. She tried in vain to shake off this fear, but the nearer she came to the summit the more it harried her. She blamed herself for having rested at all on the way up. She accounted for her desire to make this climb as a call from 'Gene. Far at sea and in danger, he had perhaps prayed for her to come nearer to him. Her physical fatigue left her still more open to the obsession. Finally she grew hysterical. To herself she cried, "Coming — coming, 'Gene."

At the last one hundred yards she reached her hand imperiously towards Nat.

"Help me," she exclaimed.

He waited for her to catch up.

"Take your time," he said coolly.

"Nat, give me your hand," she cried.

He grasped her hand.

"Run," she demanded.

"So — so," he warned, trying to calm her.

She broke free from him with a maddened groan and scrambled ahead. Near the top she twisted her ankle and fell. He was at her side in an instant.

"There — ye see," he chided her.

She reached for his shoulders.

"The top — carry me to the top," she demanded.

He lifted her lightly and easily and bore her the next ten yards. She turned her eyes towards the east. The horizon line was blurred with a line of gray mist. For three seconds she stared, speechless. Then she began to sob.

"So — so," he comforted her, as she still lay in his arms.

"Put me down," she commanded.

He hesitated. She struggled passionately, fiercely. He lowered her to the ground. As she caught sight again of the dark horizon line, she turned upon him in a final outburst.

"Oh," she shuddered, "how I hate you for this!"

## CHAPTER X

### *Where the Stars Judge*

NAT was helpless. In a sad little pile she squatted at his feet, moaning and shrinking away from him. He felt responsible for her unhappiness, though he could n't, for the life of him, tell how. He stared blankly at the gathering clouds, but they offered no solution. He looked down at her again, but, from the silky hair at her temples to her shy boots, she was a mystery — a deep, unfathomable, lovable mystery. He concluded that she was tired. He blamed himself for that too. He should n't have let her come. But she had wanted to come. He slowly shook his head.

The gray of the sky line had deepened to black. Already a few dark masses had detached themselves and were sweeping higher, where, caught by the sun, they were transformed into big white balls, like corn which has popped. The brisk breeze which always blew over the summit was stiffening. It looked probable that they might get caught in a shower. He glanced down to see if she had stopped

She had raised her head and was staring, as though in fright, at the deepening gloom in the east. The on-creeping rim of black dazed her. It was as though she were witnessing some great tragedy. Tired and excited as she was, the storm took on tremendous significance. It was as though she were standing by 'Gene's side on shipboard, helpless to make him see or hear that she was there in his hour of peril. She covered her face from the sight, and trying hard to control her sobbing, gulped spasmodically.

The clouds continued to gather. They appeared almost miraculously, as though born in the blue itself. They swept up from two points of the compass in great rolling puffs like smoke from cannon. From a distance sounding as if from a thousand miles away a muffled, rolling roar tumbled to their ears.

Nat stirred about uneasily. He would know what to do with a dog or a horse or even a man, but such experience did n't help him any in the present emergency. He could n't pat her head, though in that way he had steadied many a colt and pup through moments of panic; he could n't even rest his hand upon her shoulder, though this had been enough to calm many a drink-crazed woodman. She shrank away from him every time he moved. Staring at the

black storm squadrons now maneuvering for battle, he finally spoke.

"Julie."

She did not answer.

"Julie, we must get out of here."

"Why didn't you hurry? Why didn't you hurry? Why didn't you get up here before the clouds came?" she moaned.

He faced the wind, which was fast increasing to a hurricane, and his mouth hardened.

"There's a cave down below," he answered. "We'll have to reach it before the storm strikes."

She made no reply, but rocked back and forth. The sight went to his heart.

"Come," he said.

"Go away," she answered.

He hesitated a second, and then, stooping, lightly touched her shoulder. She shrank back from him, and though the act was like a blow across his face, he repeated his command.

"Come."

"Don't touch me! Don't come anywhere near me!" she cried.

"Come," he said for the third time.

She held her breath in a final effort to contain herself. Then, to her surprise and indignation, he stooped and lifted her into his arms. Losing all

control, she struck at his face. He never even drew back his head, but accepting the patter of blows as he would the preliminary sprinkling of a shower, started down the crest. She tried to squirm free, but his arms held her without effort. They tightened about her firmly but gently, so firmly and gently that she soon ceased her struggling. It seemed as foolish to protest against that hold as against fate. Indeed after the first shock she did n't feel so much that she was in his arms as in the power of some outside impersonal force. It was n't necessary even to hold on. She was being moved without either physical or mental effort on her part. Dazed and exhausted, she relaxed completely, and closing her eyes allowed her head to drop to his shoulder. She fell into a sort of dreamy swoon, conscious of nothing except a sense of welcome relief from all further personal responsibility in the matter.

When Nat stopped, Julie opened her eyes. He lowered her to the ground before a heavy clump of bushes growing on a sharp incline. He left her there and striking a match disappeared into the clump. As she lost sight of his broad shoulders, she sat up. Pride alone prevented her from calling him back. She felt deserted. The black sky overhead and the deep shades among the pines terrified her. She fell.



upon her hands and knees and started to crawl, though the pain in her ankle was now acute. She was about to shriek his name when he appeared again.

"You oughter stayed where I left ye," he said.

The distant rumbling, which had been coming nearer and nearer, now broke over their heads in a terrific crash.

"I — I — could n't," she trembled, "I was frightened."

"Nothin' to be skeered of," he answered. "Thar's a cave in there, dry and warm."

He stooped to lift her again, and this time she did not shrink away.

He bore her into the cave. It was pitch-dark.

"Now," he said, "just sit here quiet-like till I get some wood for a fire."

"You're going to leave me alone?"

"Long 'nuff to get some dry wood afore it rains," he answered.

He went out, and for a few seconds she heard him stumbling over the rocks. Then she heard no more of him. She had never felt so absolutely alone. Now and then a flash of lightning illuminated with lurid green the cave mouth. Then followed a silence as of the grave; then a dull muffled boom upon

boom, which left her quaking and stifled. Her acute personal fear drove out all thought of the mock danger she had conjured up for 'Gene. This was not so peculiar, because that had been only an hysterical nightmare bred of the moment, but it was odd that now, in time of her own need, she herself did not turn to 'Gene. He was as remote as though he did not exist. The situation was one which Nat alone seemed made to handle. His steady eyes, his grim serious mouth, his big back and arms were designed to cope with the wind, the thunder, and the dark. He was akin to the elements. He reminded her of a hundred-year-old pine.

So she lay flat on her back, with her attention centered upon catching the first sound of his returning footsteps. Not another thing occupied her thoughts. She feared no physical harm. She did not need him to shield her from the storm, but from an overpowering sense of isolation — as though they two were alone in this vast world. She gave herself up to every passing humor. She grew almost primitive; she was just a woman waiting in this cave mouth for the companionship of her man. In this mood no man could so well answer that need as Nat. Whatever the passion was which had swayed her on the mountain top it had now vanished utterly. She did not even recall it. She heard a

rattle of loose stones and sat up. Nat staggered to the opening with one arm piled high with wood. He carried also the lunch pail filled with water. He had been all the way back to the spring to get this. She greeted him with a glad cry.

"All safe?" he asked.

She fell back without answering. Yes, she was all safe now. She watched him as he piled up his wood in a farther corner of the cave, where a narrow aperture to the surface, made by a rift in the rocks, formed a natural chimney. He started out once more.

"You are n't going — again?" she exclaimed.

"I left some more wood out here," he answered.

He was back in a minute, and she watched him kindle the blaze. The suction of the wind overhead made a draft which carried off the smoke. The flames flooded the cave with mellow light and instantly drove the storm a hundred miles away.

He worked in silence. She watched every motion with as much interest as though she had never before seen him.

With the light and the warmth her nerves steadied down and her thoughts became calmer. Except for the throbbing pain in her ankle she was now languidly at ease. For the first time in a month she relaxed completely. This was made possible, as it had

been when she was in Nat's arms, by the realization that she was in the grip of a fate beyond her control. Only this time it was a gentle fate. The situation appealed to her love for adventure, and the setting, to her craving for the romantic. Her tired body brought a delicious drowsiness that numbed her brain and left her still more a creature of sentiment. She was a cave woman, and this big-bodied companion some cave man.

Nat worked over his fire until it was burning to suit him. Then crossing two heavy sticks above the flames, he hung his water pail from the center and threw in a handful of coffee. This done, he turned back to Julie.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"You ought to eat something just the same. When the coffee's done, we'll have dinner."

"All right," she answered meekly.

"Ankle hurt?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"You ought to put hot water on it. Soon's we've had our coffee I'll heat some."

She flushed.

"I'll wait till I get home," she answered.

"You can't wait," he answered. "It ought to be soaked and then tied up."

She knew in the end that he would probably make her do this, but she drew her feet farther under her skirts. He returned to the fire and stirred the coffee with a stick. He went about getting ready this meal as naturally as though this were his home. He made the ordinary accessories of civilization seem superfluous. He stripped life down to a simple standard that just now appealed strongly to Julie. She had never thought it possible that she should like him as she did at this moment.

When the coffee was boiling, he brought the bread-and-butter, the hard-boiled eggs, the pie and doughnuts to her side, and arranged them within easy reach. He removed the pail, threw some more wood on the fire, and squatted near her.

"Now," he said, "eat as much as you can."

The thunder was still rumbling, but the heart of the storm had passed over the mountain and was now raging above the valley. Up here a steady downpour had taken its place.

"I don't feel at all hungry, Nat," she protested.

However, just to please him, she nibbled at the bread. But she really enjoyed the coffee, bitter and unsweetened as it was, for it both warmed and stimulated her.

"You're tired?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, very tired."

"I'm sorry. I guess I had n't ought to let you come."

She laughed a little at that.

"No," she agreed, "you should n't have."

A twinge of pain in her ankle made her fall back with a gasp and brought him to his feet.

"We'll have to care for that foot now," he said.

"I'll go down to the spring and get some more water."

He seized the pail and disappeared once more into the storm.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Cave Woman*

AS soon as he had left, Julie crouched for warmth and comfort as close to the light and heat of the flames as possible. It made a big difference whether or not he was here with her. But the knowledge that he would soon be back again calmed her fears. In the waiting itself she found a certain excitement which sharpened the illusion that she was living in some bygone day when men and women stood stark in their relations one to another. She felt as primitive as any of the roving things wandering among the trees here on the mountain top. In this particular situation the rest of the world seemed to play no part whatever. The episode was isolated from all the rest of her life. It was now just he and she, and it was he who was responsible for this. He looked so big and self-confident by and in himself alone that it seemed possible for them to live on here indefinitely. He would hunt and fish for her, bring her water and make her warm with fire, and lead her among the pleasant places in the sun-lighted

forest. It gave her a sense of delightful vagabondage, and in the intensity of this gypsy emotion she lost herself completely.

Her hair had fallen about her face, and now she quite calmly took it down. It was heavy and black and reached below her knees. Instead of putting it up again she braided it in a single full braid. Then she stretched herself out languidly, but with ears alert to catch the first sound of his return. Nat seemed like a new man to her up here, where his fearlessness and his physical strength became his most dominant characteristics. He had never before shown her the positive side of his nature. She had known him merely as a shy good-natured fellow, who in his attentions to her had brought forth nothing but the commonplace. Now for the first time she saw him as he really was, big and primitive as a savage. She thrilled with the power of him. She felt that it was impossible to fear anything with him near, either wind or dark or wild beasts or spirits. Most significant of all, he relieved her of all responsibility to herself. She had no need of remaining on guard.

With her eyes half closed she pictured him fighting his way down the rugged slopes to the spring; saw him stoop and fill his pail and then scramble up the heights again. She saw his broad back and



the ease with which he handled himself — details she had never noticed before. But those things now counted to her as a cave woman.

The rattling of stones at the cave entrance made Julie sit up with a glad leap of her heart. Then she heard a low snorting grunt and saw a fat furry body press through the opening, followed by a second and larger form. For a moment they seemed like apparitions, but in a second she recognized them as a big black bear and cub. Attracted by the heat and the scent of food, they too had sought shelter here. She crouched as far back as possible, with her eyes glued upon them, hardly daring to breathe.

The cub continued towards the flames, but the mother stopped to sniff and blink through tiny black eyes at the other presence here. Then, with a low growl, she ambled on towards the food which had been left in the frying-pan on the ground. Slow and clumsy though she was, she revealed power in every lumbering movement. With a quick blow of one of her forefeet she sent the pan spinning across the cave and summoned her cub to share in the scattered contents. So for a moment they busied themselves, shying away from the fire.

Julie watched them. She knew that the slightest sound would attract the brute in her direction, and that, cornered, the bear would n't hesitate to attack.

A single blow of one of those forefeet with their two-inch claws would be fatal. The girl found herself repeating Nat's name over and over again in a sort of prayer.

In a moment or two he came, as she knew he would.

He crowded into the cave before she could shout a warning. At sight of the bear he gave a startled cry.

"Julie."

"Nat," she answered.

Darting to the right to escape the growling attack, he first made his way to her side. He seized her in his arms.

"Are you hurt?" he choked.

In the deep agony of that cry she learned how much her man he was in very truth. She learned how much her man he was, and the revelation even in this moment of danger smothered her.

"I — I'm not hurt," she gasped.

The bear, still growling, faced the two uncertainly. Pressing the girl to his side, Nat waited a second, made delirious by the warmth of her young body against him.

Then in a flash he snatched from the fire a burning log as thick as his arm and rushed forward. Thrusting the hot coals in the brute's eyes, he forced her

back, and as she began to retreat rained blow after blow over her head. Roaring with rage, the cub whining at her heels, the bear backed to the farther end of the cave. Doubtless she would have gone out had it not been for the cub, who at this moment stumbled off to one side. The mother followed her young, and then turning suddenly charged and snapped at Nat's leg. He escaped by the fraction of an inch, but in keeping himself in front of the girl he dropped his weapon.

Julie, who had remained spellbound by the contest, uttered a cry of horror at this. Then, as though a new spirit had been born in her, she seized another burning stick from the fire and made her way to Nat. He swung her to one side just in time to save her from a return rush.

"Back," he cried, "stay back!"

But she had thrust the stick into his hand, and with it he bullied the bear once more to the cave entrance. Then he dropped his stick and, grabbing the cub almost from beneath the mother's nose, lifted it high and threw it bodily out of the cave. He paid for his rashness with a sharp clawing blow upon the leg, but that did n't matter, for the bear instantly turned her attention to the whining cub and ambled out.

Through the smoke that filled the cave the girl

limped forward to Nat's side again. Quite unconsciously he placed his arm about her to steady her.

"You did n't get hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No. But your leg — see, it's bleeding."

He glanced down at a long blood-soaked rent in his trousers.

"That's so," he answered, and then dismissed the incident from his mind. What did the matter of a torn leg count to him in the face of the fact that she was safe and here by his side?

He drew her to the cave mouth, where the air was fresher. They were both half blinded by the smoke.

"I should n't have left ye alone, Julie," he apologized.

"You did n't," she answered quite simply. "I knew all the while that you were close by."

The rain was now falling with a rhythmic steadiness that promised to continue through the night. It was already fast growing dark, and yet these facts, which ordinarily would have disturbed them, apparently escaped their notice. As far as Julie was concerned this whole affair was still too unreal to be judged sanely. This man had just fought for her life against a forest creature and had conquered. Shoulder to shoulder by his side, she stared out at

the dark with him and was content. As for him, he knew only that she had clung to him and that when he had taken her in his arms she had not resisted. He knew that here this second she was close to him, and that because of what he had done she thought well of him.

When the cave had cleared of smoke, he rekindled the fire and turned his attention to his leg. It was a deeper cut than he had thought, but he bound it up without letting her see it, and then started to heat the water with which she was to bathe her ankle. When it was hot, he bade her use it as warm as she could stand it.

She obeyed, and the heat instantly brought the blood to the skin. The ankle, however, was really badly swollen. When she came to bandage it with the strips he had cut from the lining of his coat, she found the task impossible.

"I can't do it, Nat," she said weakly.

"All right," he answered, "I'll do it."

He had been sitting back to her at the cave mouth and now came to her side. She thrust out her ankle, and he knelt and bound it as tightly as he could. He handled it as gently as a surgeon.

She fell back after this to rest, every muscle in her body drowsy with fatigue. For a moment he studied her and then said with determination:

"Julie, either we must start now or wait till mornin'."

"Then," she answered sleepily, "I guess we'll have to wait."

He made no comment, but at once went out and began to gather firewood for the night, breaking over his knee sticks as big as his arm as easily as though they were twigs. After this he gathered a half-dozen armfuls of springy boughs which he piled up in one corner close to the fire.

"What are those for, Nat?" she asked drowsily.

"A bed for you," he answered.

It was long after dark before he finished his labors, and then he insisted that she lie down at once and go to sleep.

"I believe I can sleep," she answered.

He assisted her to the fragrant couch, and she found it very comfortable. The heat from the fire struck the length of her tired body and enveloped her as in a blanket. He wanted to throw his coat over her shoulders, but she would not allow this.

"You must get some rest yourself," she said solicitously.

"Don't worry 'bout me," he said as he squatted the other side of the fire.

"You must get yourself some boughs and lie

down," she insisted sleepily. "You must lie down. You must —"

But her eyes had already closed. He smiled, and settled back comfortably where he could watch her.

She woke up several times during the night when he was obliged to fix the fire. But each time it was only for a minute. Generally she just smiled at him, stirred into a more comfortable position, and closing her eyes fell asleep once more. Towards morning it grew colder. He piled on more wood, and removing his coat, gently laid it over her shoulders. The cave was fairly warm, but when he did feel a bit chilly he roused himself and paced back and forth with a remarkably soft tread for so heavy a man.

That was a wonderful night to him. With his long arms crossed over his knees, he watched her face and dreamed big dreams. When the first streak of day drew back the dark curtain from over the cave mouth, he went out, and pressing aside the bushes saw that the sky was clear. He listened there for the morning songs of the birds, and when they came, at first sleepily and then with a brisk chirp that awoke the whole world, his heart was filled to overflowing. He took his pail and went down to the spring for fresh water, moving through a woodland paradise. When he came back, he found that she had limped outside and was waiting for him

under the trees. She had just finished rearranging her hair and was coiling the last black strand about her head.

"Good-morning, guardian," she greeted him.

"Mornin', Julie," he answered out of his full heart.

"Nat," she exclaimed, "for a maiden in distress I slept disgracefully well."

"I'm glad."

"And how did you sleep? Every time I woke up I saw you bending over the fire."

"'Cause you woke up every time I fixed the fire," he explained.

She studied his fresh face, rosy from the sting of the spring water.

"You *look* rested," she said.

"I am," he answered, "rested all over."

"And now what are you going to do?"

"Get breakfast."

"And then?"

He drew a deep breath.

"Take you back," he answered.

She looked puzzled.

"I'd forgotten all about going back," she said.

"We've got to get back before the folks miss ye or —"

"Well?" she hesitated.



Then her face grew scarlet.

"The folks," she said, half to herself, as though she just remembered them.

Who were the folks? There were the Millers, there were her mother and father, and there was — 'Gene. She caught her breath. The stark morning sky forced her thoughts along a straight line with brutal insistence. There was 'Gene. She stared at Nat as though he were an apparition. There was 'Gene. She rose to her feet. Nat took a step towards her, but she drew back. She passed her hand over her forehead and eyes. There was 'Gene.

"Nat," she said, "I guess I won't have any breakfast. We must get back. Why — we must get back right off."

She sank to the rock upon which she had been sitting while combing her hair.

This was just such another morning as that on which she had risen at dawn and gone down the road to bid her lover God-speed. She had stood by his side, and he had taken her in his arms — on just such a morning as this. She had pledged her troth to him and promised to wait for him, and so he had gone on his adventurous journey with a cheerful heart. He was just such a man as this other, only — he was 'Gene. He was not Nat, he was 'Gene.

She covered her face in confusion. How did it

happen that she was here? How did it happen that for a moment she had forgotten him? In shame and contrition she pressed her hands against her hot cheeks.

"You don't know how I hate to take ye back, Julie," Nat was saying. "Somehow it seems as though you belonged up here. Seems as though we both belonged up here."

She lifted her head and faced this other man. He had made her forget. Her mouth grew hard.

"We will start at once," she said.

"I don't suppose there's anything else to do," he admitted reluctantly.

He gathered his things together, and then approached her as though meaning to carry her. But she drew back quickly and started off ahead of him. Though the swelling had subsided, her ankle was still sore and lame. She found it impossible to rest her weight upon it, and though indignant at the necessity was forced finally to ask him for help.

"Ye'll let me carry you?" he asked eagerly.

"Certainly not," she exclaimed.

"That would be easiest."

"Let me take hold of your arm. That — that's all I want."

He extended his arm, and she placed her own through it. In this way they stumbled on for per-

haps ten minutes. Then again she stopped. She was almost in tears.

"Oh, it hurts. It hurts dreadfully," she moaned.

"Why won't you let me carry you?" he asked gently.

She did not answer. She hid her face again. She would be too comfortable in those strong arms. She deserved the pain. For 'Gene's sake she must endure it. This was a just penance. But when she rose again to continue, her ankle crumpled up beneath her and she fell prone. Without a word he bent over her and picked her up. He adjusted her in the hollow of his left arm as he might a child. For a moment or so she protested weakly, but he gave no heed and strode on. At the end of a half-hour he put her down in a bed of moss and rested. Neither of them spoke. Then he picked her up again. In this way they went on in silence along the side of the brook to the old wood road, along this to the highway, and so to the foot of Hio Hill and up to the little red schoolhouse.

It was here that she awakened again as though from a spell. In a panic she suddenly squirmed free of his arms. Once on the ground she turned upon him like a little fury.

"Go home!" she cried. "I don't need you any

..

He watched her for a moment, trying to fathom this new turn. The best solution he could give was that she was tired. Women acted queer when they were tired.

"So," he said gently. "Jus' ye sit down an' rest a jiffy. It won't take us five minutes to climb the hill."

She trembled in the grip of her passion. She would die of shame if she were forced to pass the place where she and 'Gene had stood—in this man's arms.

"Go," she choked.

He placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Steady, steady," he warned.

She shrank back from him. She sank down on the grass.

"Oh," she moaned through her teeth, "how I hate you!"

"Hate me?" he gasped.

"Hate you! Hate you! Go away and leave me," she stormed.

It was so she had spoken on the mountain top. It did n't worry him so much this time as it had at first. He waited until she should recover herself. Sitting on a rock a little way from where she lay sobbing, he passed his hand again and again over his hot red forehead.

He himself was beginning now to feel the strain of the last twenty-four hours. For the first time in his life he was conscious of physical fatigue. His left arm was almost numb and his wounded leg throbbed with pain. As the sobbing died down, he rose stiffly.

"Ye must n't lie thar," he said. "Come. We'll soon be back."

"Are n't you going?" she demanded.

"No," he answered steadily. "Not till I get ye back."

She sat up.

"Nat," she exclaimed, "if you don't leave me this minute, I — I'll never speak to you again."

For a moment he looked worried. Then he answered:

"I can't help it, Julie."

"Then you are n't going?"

"No."

She staggered to her feet.

"Don't you understand that I want you to go?"

"Yes," he said without moving.

"And you won't?"

"Not till I get ye back home."

Her lips were white.

"If I was a man, I'd hit you," she raged.

"Yes, Julie."

"I'd hit you as hard as I could."

"You can do it now if it'll help ye any," he answered.

She staggered forward. He picked her up again with a quick movement which took her off her guard. She struck at his face and neck while he went on with her. As they passed the place where she had stood with 'Gene, she crowded both hands over her eyes with a dry sob. He went on to the very door of the Miller house with her. They met no one. Even the Millers were out of sight. He set her down on the doorstep.

She lifted her face as white as marble.

"Will you go now?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Now I'll go 'long."

## CHAPTER XII

### *The Unfathomable*

NAT lived the rest of that day in a stupor. In the late afternoon he saw Deacon Miller drive out of his yard with Julie beside him and with her little leather trunk in behind. He watched anxiously to see if she would turn up to the house to say good-by, but without even so much as a look behind she disappeared down the road towards St. Croix. That night Nat did all the chores without knowing very much what he was about. He went to bed immediately afterwards. But he didn't sleep. Not only was he tortured by the memory of those last five minutes when with hate in her eyes she had struggled to get free of him, but he was made restless by much more material pains. He ached from the crown of his sandy head to the tips of his big feet. He had something of a fever and coughed a good deal. In the morning a dull ache in his chest had developed into a cutting stab which made it difficult for him to breathe.

In spite of this he rose at his usual hour and

limped around the barn until he had fed the stock and finished milking. Then without eating breakfast he shut himself up in his room again. He went over the whole trip, from the climb to her queer actions on the summit. Then the night in the cave. This made him almost forget his aches. She had been very good to him there. She had smiled at him and had trusted him and seemed glad that he was there. But some change had taken place while he had gone to the spring for water the next morning. He reviewed everything he had said or done, but this did not account for it. It must have been some clumsy thing he did unconsciously. Yesterday his thoughts had been so much centered on the one necessity of getting her back that he had not questioned her about this. At the time the cause of her attitude did n't matter. She was only a tired child, and his duty lay solely in getting her home. Now it mattered a great deal. When he saw her drive away, it had seemed to him that his whole future was at stake. He must know what it was he had done, and make her see that he had meant no harm. Harm to Julie? Why, the smallest finger on her little hand was dearer to him than his whole life. He paced his room in a frenzy of eager love for her. After that night when he had had the merest taste of what it meant to care for her, to guard and toil



for her, he knew that so far as his own life went, it must always be towards this goal. All his hopes and ambitions centered in her. There was nothing else, could be nothing else, but Julie.

So for an hour the big fellow tried to fathom the unfathomable; so for an hour he pitted his simple, direct mind against that most complex of all mysteries — the whimsical passions of a very young woman. It might have been comedy had he not been so loyal and earnest. He was like some sober philosopher trying to range into laws the wayward moods of an April day. He was in a still more absurd position because, in his case, there was a second mystery of which he did not even suspect. He flung himself prone upon his bed. He heard his father's voice.

"Hain't ye goin' t' harrer that South field ter-day?"

He roused himself. This was Monday. He had forgotten the regular routine of his life. His daily work seemed a very trivial matter. He staggered to his feet, weak and dizzy.

"All right," he answered.

For three hours he followed his horse over the field, but his arms were as weak as a child's. He did nothing but stumble behind the well-trained team. It was as much as he could do to handle his feet.

Every now and then he was seized by a chill which shook his whole frame. This was usually followed by a fever. The reins hung loose from his hands at these moments, and he stumbled over clods no larger than an apple.

At noon he made up his mind to drive to St. Croix and see the doctor. This would give him an opportunity to pass Julie's house. He might catch a glimpse of her; he might even stop and ask how she was. His brain was just giddy enough to make him act impulsively.

His mother protested and his father called him a blamed fool, when they saw his condition, but he did n't hear much of what they said. He held his mind to the one idea. He must see Julie again. The more he dwelt upon this, the more urgent the necessity seemed. He harnessed the colt with feverish haste. His father offered to go with him, but he refused to allow it.

"I'm all right," he said over and over again.

His mother made him drink some hot tea and helped him into a heavy overcoat with her eyes brimming tears. Then he headed the horse towards St. Croix.

He did n't have a very clear idea of what happened during the next three hours. The horse took his own gait, and Nat was aware of nothing but an

interminable yellow road which unrolled beneath his hot eyes. He did n't come to himself until he saw the Moulton house — a neat white-painted structure a mile this side of St. Croix. He drove up into the yard and in some way maneuvered his weak legs to the ground. He stumbled to the front door and knocked. In a few seconds he found himself facing Mrs. Moulton, who looked more like Julie's sister than her mother. Resting his hand on the door-frame, he moistened his lips.

"I want to see Julie," he announced.

"Why, Nat," exclaimed Mrs. Moulton at the sight of his fever-laden eyes, "what's the matter with you?"

She hesitated a moment and then added quickly, "Come into the sitting-room."

He followed her and sank into the first chair he saw.

"Now what's the trouble?" demanded Mrs. Moulton with motherly concern.

"I want to see Julie," he repeated dully.

She studied him a moment and hurried out. From where he sat Nat could hear the ticking of the kitchen clock. It ticked ten thousand times before Mrs. Moulton returned. She was plainly disturbed.

"Julie says — she can't come down," she informed him with evident reluctance.

He lifted his head.

"Is she sick?"

"She twisted her ankle yesterday," she answered, as though glad of some excuse for the girl's conduct.

"Is she laid up — in bed?" he asked.

"No, she's dressed," answered Mrs. Moulton.  
"But — she can't walk very well."

Nat rose to his feet. He was very wobbly. His lips came together.

"Then," he said with decision, "I'll go up to her."

He started towards the door. Half-way there he fell in his tracks and lay where he fell.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *'Gene Proposes*

THE kitchen of the Élite café was located in the basement. It did not differ much from the orthodox conception of Hell, except that in place of sulphur fumes the air was reeking heavy with the greasy sweat of ham and eggs. Yet the lady who prepared this specialty for which the restaurant had in a way become locally famous, apparently thrived in the atmosphere. She was portly to the point of waddling. She looked as though, if she remained a second over-long by the stove, she too might sizzle off into a smudge of thick blue smoke. It may have been to save herself from this danger that from time to time she raised to her thick lips a can of foamy amber-colored liquid and drank deep and long. Whatever the contents did to cool her body, they served only to add fire to her temper. 'Gene, who in a dirty white apron stood beneath a dim gas-jet at the farther end of the room bending over a sink full of dishes, kept one eye upon her. Mrs. Hanrihan was in the habit of first calling attention to her wishes by hurling the most convenient object

she had at hand. Therefore he found it wise to anticipate her needs as far as possible.

Mrs. Hanrihan grasped the handle of a frying-pan, deftly tossed the contents into the air with a motion that caused the eggs to do a somersault and return bottom side up, then once again she uptilted the can to her lips. 'Gene watched the process with an experienced eye. As the can approached the perpendicular, he hastily wiped his hands on his apron and edged nearer. She lowered the can with a bleery glare towards the sink and mechanically reached for a large spoon. Her hand paused in mid-air as she saw 'Gene waiting by her side.

"Phot t' hell do you want?" she demanded.

"Nothin'."

She faced him pugnaciously. On the whole she did n't care to have him anticipate her wants. She not only preferred to do things in her own way, but she had a vague notion that in taking for granted her unquenchable thirst 'Gene was reflecting upon her reputation for sobriety which she never allowed any one to question. She had sustained this reputation by never being altogether sober in fifteen years and so affording no basis for comparison. Her erratic actions and hot temper thus passed as mere eccentricities of disposition.

"Phot t' hell do you want?" she repeated, shifting the emphasis from the personal pronoun to the noun.

"Nothin'," he answered restlessly, as he waited for the can. Diplomacy justified the sacrifice of strict truth.

She eyed him from head to foot, but his face remained as impassive as his boots.

"Ye're after thinkin' I want more suds? Huh?"

"Did n't know but what ye might like a drop just to moisten your throat," he admitted.

"Phot if I do?" she demanded, still looking for some excuse to use the iron spoon.

"I'd get it for ye," he allowed.

"Ye would, would yer? Thin why the hell don't yer? Phot yer standin' there fer? Phot —"

Having by this time worked herself up to the proper pitch, she made a pass at him. He dodged, seized the can, and went out. He crossed the street to the neighboring saloon, where Mrs. Hanrihan kept a standing account, and saw the can filled without a necessary syllable of explanation on his part. The beer looked so cool and refreshing that after a moment's hesitation he ordered a glass for himself. He drank this with such satisfactory results that he ordered a second.

It not only washed away the taste of ham and eggs, but it stimulated in him a latent rebellion.

It was Bella who had secured for him this job of dishwasher in the same restaurant where she served as waitress. After three days of idleness, during which she had furnished him with food and lodging, he had accepted this employment more in a spirit of gratitude to her than anything else. But now he was heartily tired of it. The humid, noisome atmosphere made him half sick; the hours from six in the morning until after eleven at night left him each day dead for lack of sleep, and finally Mrs. Hanrihan kept him in a constant state of irritation. Had it not been for Bella's advice to hold the job until she found something better for him, he would have chucked it long ago. He did n't propose to stand being bullied by any one.

The ale, having in a few minutes roused him from a state of dejection to this stanch attitude, he was convinced that a third glass might do even more. He swallowed it, and his highest hopes were realized. On the spot he determined that he had endured enough from Mrs. Hanrihan. Bella had been very good to him, but there was a limit as to what he could stand even for her sake. She had been very good to him indeed. He never had realized it more



fully than he did this minute. He liked Bella. He went to the Ferry with her every night. At first he had thought her rather homely, but of late she seemed to be growing handsome.

The barkeeper at this point offered a bit of advice.

"Better git along with them suds."

"Let her wait," said 'Gene.

"Take it from me, bo'," answered the barkeeper; "don't let her wait."

"Why not?" demanded 'Gene.

"'Cause she'll raise a fine crop of bumps on that sandy nut o' yours if yuh do," he replied.

He swabbed off the dark mahogany with an expression of conviction mixed with utter indifference.

'Gene picked up the can and went out. His legs were springy now. At the foot of the stairs leading to the kitchen he lifted the can and took a long draught. When he pushed into the kitchen, his face was beaming. Mrs. Hanrihan made one dive for him with a volley of oaths that ordinarily would have cowed him. This time, however, she had reckoned without taking into consideration the three glasses of ale. 'Gene shook himself free as easily as a cub bear and faced her.

"Keerful, ol' lady!" he warned.

Mrs. Hanrihan stared a second in dumb amaze-

ment. Her mouth was open and she had every appearance of delivering an extra-fine line of oaths, and yet not a single word passed her lips. The effect was impressive.

"Hold your hosses, ol' lady!" 'Gene advised further.

Mrs. Hanrihan rolled her sleeves up over her heavy arms. 'Gene watched the preparations, still beaming. A pan of frying eggs left on the stove began to smoke. Still dumb, she leveled a stiff blow at him and bore down. He seized her by one fat shoulder and in spite of her weight held her immovable. Glaring, she waved her arms. His fingers sank into rolls of fat with a tighter grip which made her wince.

"Dom ye," she coughed, "dom ye!"

Then, as she found herself in a vise, she emitted a long piercing scream ending in the blood-curdling cry of

"Murther! Murther!"

He dropped his hand. The room was filled with smoke that blinded them both. 'Gene knew his hour had come, and in a final fit of drunken recklessness seized the can of beer and deliberately poured it over Mrs. Hanrihan's head. Spluttering and gasping, she repeated her cry. 'Gene seized his hat and coat and ducked out of the room, up the back stairs

and out doors. He crossed to the saloon and threw his last nickel down on the bar. As he gave his order, the barkeeper grinned.

"Guess yuh on now. Huh?"

"Guess she is too," answered 'Gene amiably.

"Yuh don't mean yuh done her up?"

"Oughter go over an' see her," said 'Gene.

The barkeeper shook his head.

"Not fer me. I'm near 'nuff right here," he answered. "But dere's a diamond belt comin' to youse if she took der count. She useter trim Han-rihan reg'lar, an' he done some good men hisself in his day."

"Poured th' suds down her neck," chuckled 'Gene.

"Th' hell yuh did," exclaimed the barkeeper.

He seemed to have an inspiration.

"Say — did yuh ever put on der mitts?"

"What ye mean?"

"Ever do any sluggin'? Yuh've gut der build all right — all right."

"No," answered 'Gene, "I never fought none, but I ain't no slouch wrestlin'."

"Bet yuh could handle yuh dukes too. I'd like to see yuh staked up ag'in some un 'bout yuh size. Maybe I can fix it up fer yuh. Dere's a ten spot in a lively go — win or lose."

Even in his present self-confident frame of mind, 'Gene did not enthuse rapidly over this kindly offer.

"I'll see 'bout it bime bye," he returned.

"I'll have a talk with Flynn," the barkeeper nodded. "Drop in next week and we'll see wot we can frame up."

'Gene finished his ale and went out. Bella would not be through for another hour yet, and he decided to wait for her. He strutted up and down the street with a great deal of satisfaction to himself. He felt freer and more independent than he had at any time since he left home. He consumed a very pleasant hour in this way. He anticipated with a good deal of pleasure recounting to Bella how he had fixed old Hanrihan. He knew that even the proprietor stood in awe of the cook and so considered his exploit something worth boasting about. As he saw Bella come out the door, he hurried up. But to his surprise, instead of greeting him with her usual smile, she faced him with a decided scowl.

"Well," she exclaimed, "you've done it now, all right."

"Done what?" he asked.

"Done for us both," she snapped.

"Did n't do nothin' 'cept to old Hanrihan," he answered sulkily.

"Did n't, eh? Did n't you know you might just

as well swatted the boss as old Hanrihan? Did n't you know you 'd git yerself fired an' me too?"

"You," exclaimed 'Gene. "Ye meanter say they fired you?"

"Ain't you my friend? Did n't I have t' back you up? What you think they 'd do — raise my pay?"

"I did n't think of you," he half apologized.

"I s'pose not," she returned. "That's the trouble with all you men — you don't think till after the funeral."

She seemed to be taking the matter very much to heart. She had n't once looked at him. She kept her eyes on the ground. She appeared nervous and uneasy. He braced up.

"Never mind, Bella," he said, "I'll get 'nother job in a day or two. I did n't take to that one, nohow. I could n't stand it. There's plenty of better jobs nor that."

Something in his self-confident air made her look up and search his face. She noticed that his eyes were a trifle glazed, that his face was flushed.

"Look a here," she demanded, "you been hittin' the booze?"

"Jus' a mug o' ale," he answered with exaggerated carelessness.

She drew a quick breath.

"So that 's it! That 's what made you so fresh?"

He turned away uneasily.

"You don't know how thirsty a feller gets in that hole," he answered.

For a moment she studied his face. He looked so big and handsome and childlike that it hurt her to see him like this. But she was n't any fool. She knew what this meant. She took a step or two away as though to get out of danger.

"So that 's it," she repeated.

She lifted her head.

"Take it from me," she exclaimed, "I don't mix up in that kind of deal. If you're goneter fight booze, you fight it alone. Right here 's where we part comp'ny."

"What you mean?" he asked.

"I 'm talkin' English, ain't I? Plain English? Make it as strong as you like — I don't mix up with no man what plays that game."

"I did n't mean no harm, Bella," he answered.

"Course you did n't," she returned, her eyes snapping, "course you did n't. These guys what tank up and then starts in to smash the furniture never means no harm. They 's just foolin', that 's all. An' when it 's all over they did n't know what they was doin'. So you haster forgive 'em. Not for

. . .

She started off down the avenue. He followed after her in alarm. The very thought of her leaving him alone in this way frightened him.

"Don't be so hasty, Bella," he pleaded. "I won't do it again. Honest, I won't."

She continued towards the Ferry. He kept along by her side.

"I did n't mean no harm," he repeated. "An' as far's losing the job goes I'm glad of it. I'll get suthin' else. A feller told me he could get me a job on the Ferry. I'll get twicet as much for it and have a chance to work daytimes. It's outer doors too, and thar's where I belong. It's a kinder searfarin' life and I allers wanted that."

He rattled on in a breath, but she gave no sign of interest. He changed his tactics.

"That place was makin' me sick. I could n't eat nothin' and could n't sleep none."

She glanced out at him from the corner of her eye. That sounded true enough. She had watched him lose weight and noticed that his eyes were heavy. It had worried her.

"I'll have the other job in a day or two and it'll give me a chance to pay you back," he ran on. "I've wanted to do that all 'long."

She felt her resolution fading. No one could remain angry very long at a time with 'Gene. And

she — least of all. The mere fact that he wanted to care for her, whether she needed it or not, was enough to melt a mood which at best had been forced. Even walking along here by his side, seeing him tower so high above her shoulders, gave her a sense of protection that was sheer joy to her.

“What 'bout that other job?” she questioned.

“Ryan told me 'bout it. He sleeps at the same house. Said there 'd be a chance for a deck hand 'fore long.”

“How much?”

“Ten a week,” he answered eagerly.

“You 'd better take it,” she answered.

“An' ye 'll let me pay you back outer it?”

“Guess I can run me own car,” she answered.

She did not say it with much spirit. She waited a little breathless to see what he would say next. As a matter of fact, her position was not so comfortable as it might be. She was living with a married sister, and their relations had been somewhat strained lately. In some way the latter had discovered her interest in this unknown man and had talked in so direct and brutal a fashion about it that Bella found it no longer comfortable to live on at home. She had already resolved to take the few dollars she had saved and secure a room in the city. Now that she



had lost her job she was more than ever resolved to do this, though it made it all the harder.

They had reached the Ferry. She did not wish to go home with things still in the air.

"Let's go down to the park," she suggested.

The park lay along the water front a few minutes' walk to the left. With a smile which she did not see, he agreed. All he needed to escape from his troubled conscience was this evidence of relenting on her part. He took her arm. The act brought the blood to her face, but she did not resent it. With great solicitude he guided her through the crowd and to one of the green benches facing the ocean. The air was warm and dry. She sank down with a sigh and he seated himself near her.

"Seems good to get a breath of fresh air," he said.

She took off her hat and placing it in her lap smoothed back the hair from her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "it does. An' I dunno what you guys that's borned where it grows ever quits it for."

He started. He had told her little about his past. He had said merely that he came from up Maine way. He didn't like to talk about that past with her. He always swerved away from

"I dunno," he answered lightly; "a feller needs suthin' more 'n air."

"'Gene," she said earnestly, "take it from me — you made the mistake of your life when you gut that hunch."

"I dunno," he answered vaguely.

What she said next she said with an effort. She had had it in her mind for a week. She had said it to him a hundred times in her dreams, but it was a more difficult thing actually to put into words. But now with a quick intake of breath she forced herself to it.

"'Gene," she began.

"Yes, Bella."

"If I stakes you to th' ticket, will you beat it back?"

"Back?"

He was looking at her in wonder. He was leaning a little towards her with that smile about his lips which seemed somehow to remove from his shoulders all the responsibility which falls upon most men.

"Back to th' old farm," she answered with a wan smile. "Back to the hayseed. Back — outer all this."

When she dared look up at him, her eyes were very tender. He ventured to take her hand. She allowed it so for a second and then withdrew it.

"None o' that," she warned in a voice that was not natural. For one thing it trembled; for another it was raised hardly above a whisper.

"What d' you say, 'Gene?" she asked, returning to her original proposal.

"That I 've got to get even with you anyhow before I go back," he answered.

She knew what she should have done; she should have laughed in his face; she should have made him believe that his going made absolutely no difference to her. She knew well how it should be done and knew furthermore how to do it. Yet she only raised her head a little higher and through half-closed eyes dreamily listened to the waves as they crawled up the gray sand. She knew that his arm was stealing with apparent aimlessness but in reality with deliberate design along the back of the seat. She shivered as she finally felt the pressure of it against her own tired shoulders. She had never before allowed any one such a liberty. The reason she did not now protest was perhaps that she did not interpret any act of his as a liberty. From the first the hard cynical attitude which her bitter observation of men had cultivated dropped before the clear eyes of 'Gene. The fact that he came from the hill country disarmed her. The further fact that he revealed neither in speech nor in thought the be-

mired conception of her sex which she heard from every other source allowed her the relief of relaxing somewhat in her relations with him.

"Bella," he was saying, "you've ben mighty good to me and now I want to do for you a little. I would n't try to get another job if I was you. I'll be earnin' 'nuff for both of us pretty soon."

Ordinarily she would have sprung to her feet at such a speech. Now she only leaned a little more heavily against his side.

"You have n't even gut your job yet," she answered.

"I'll get it all right," he answered confidently. "Why don't ye come over here in the city an' live?"

"I was thinkin' of it," she answered.

"You might get a room at the same house I'm boarding at," he suggested.

She met his eyes at that. She looked into them very earnestly.

"'Gene," she said, "are you goin' to play fair with me?"

"Play fair? What d'ye mean?"

With her eyes still upon his, she answered:

"You know what I mean."

As a matter of fact, he did n't. He was even cleaner in his thoughts than in her most idealistic

moments she gave him credit for. Still, because he did n't wish to appear altogether green, he answered as though he understood her fully:

"O' course I am, Bella."

With a sigh of relief she allowed herself to settle more comfortably against his firm shoulders.

"All right," she said, "then I'll come."

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Two in a Garret*

THE next day Bella found herself installed on the top floor of the boarding-house in a room next 'Gene's. It was n't much of a room, but there was a roof to keep off the rain and a bed to sleep in, and those, after all, are the essentials. Her household goods she had brought over in a dress-suit case. They consisted solely of a very limited wardrobe. With a thrift based upon an early resolution never to be forced into a position of dependence upon any male, she had saved out of her earnings whatever she had not been obliged to contribute to her sister's household instead of spending the surplus upon either clothes or entertainment. The result had been a lonely life which had further strengthened her cynicism, but it gave her the opportunity for taking her present independent stand.

Bella had no intention of loafing on here indefinitely. She had two distinct ideas in accepting 'Gene's suggestion: one was to be near enough to watch over him until he was well established on his

feet, and the other was to rest for a week. She had never been able to shake off the feeling which had come over her that first night she met him — that she was in some way responsible for this big overgrown boy. He was her charge. She knew the world and he did n't, and because he had come to her clean and unspotted she must keep him so. She did n't put this into words. It was not a deliberate, well-formed plan on her part, but it was a feeling strong enough to govern her acts. It sprang, as did her aggressive attitude towards all the other men she had ever met, from a mother instinct that was strangely pure and vital.

Her desire for a vacation of a week was sufficiently novel to have set her to thinking if ever she had been in the habit of thinking about herself. This desire had come to her while she was sitting in the park by the side of 'Gene. There was something in the pressure of his strong arm that had suddenly made her wish to play the stay-at-home for a few days. She had been tired all her life. She had taken it for granted that being tired was one of the necessary burdens of her sex. She had never resented it nor disputed it. But that evening he had made her wonder how it would feel not to go to work some morning. He had made her curious as to how it would feel to be half cared for just for a little

while. She would pay for her own room, but she would enjoy the luxury of allowing him to contribute towards the meals. She could get his breakfast for him and wait for him at night. It is doubtful if she would have gone even this far had he not really owed her the money. This permitted her to play the dependant without actually being so. Any moment she did not like the experiment she could give it up.

But the significant point remained that no other man had ever bred in her such an unusual desire. However much she might compromise with herself, however tight she closed her eyes to the naked truth, enough of it leaked through to make her somewhat self-conscious. She found herself uneasily happy. Her thoughts were centering more and more around this man. She took the episode in the park for what it was worth. That 'Gene should want to put his arm about her did n't mean much — men were all that way — but that she had been willing to allow it meant a good deal. It was queer, too, that she did n't mind losing her job and that she could so easily leave her sister's home. She did n't try to explain those facts through 'Gene's attitude towards her so much as she did through her attitude towards him. With a careless smile she finally disposed of the whole matter as being merely a development of that



peculiar feeling of responsibility for him which she had felt from the beginning.

For a wonder 'Gene actually secured the job he had mentioned to her. He was to be a sort of deck hand on the Ferry and was to start work the next morning. He reported the news to her with a great deal of self-satisfied pride.

"Ye see!" he boasted.

"Fine," she nodded.

Then she told him her scheme about the breakfasts.

"No use spendin' good money at a hash house when we can knock somethin' together for half the price."

He accepted her suggestion graciously.

"Anythin' but ham an' eggs," he agreed. "I'd starve before I'd eat any more o' those."

She laughed.

"Don't blame you for slippin' yer trolley on that. We'll dope out somethin' else."

That day they went marketing together. She bought a small kerosene stove, a bottle of kerosene, a few cheap dishes and knives and forks at a ten-cent store, some coffee and butter and bread, some sugar, a can of pressed beef, a pound of cheese and some doughnuts — the latter at his suggestion. They were like two happy children as they came

back with their arms loaded. The landlady looked somewhat askance at these preparations, but her interest ceased with a significant leer. She was not one to look too closely into the relations of her boarders at a time when she had half a dozen vacant rooms on her hands. Furthermore she could not help admiring 'Gene herself. It was long since she had seen so fine a figure of a man.

'Gene had to report for work at five, which meant that Bella was forced to rise at half-past three. When her alarm-clock rang her up at this time next morning, she found herself for a moment staring into the dark with an odd feeling of excitement which at first she could not interpret. Then she remembered the big man in the next room. She scrambled out of bed and hastily dressed. She went to his door and knocked softly. He was sleeping so soundly that he did not awake at once. She whispered through the key-hole.

"'Gene, 'Gene."

"What's the matter? Who is it?" he called back.

"It's Bella," she answered. "Time to get up."

"All right," he answered sleepily.

She hurried to her room, hastily made up her bed, put away her things, and placed the coffee-pot on the kerosene stove. She spread a pillow-case over

the small table and set the two plates on opposite sides, with a knife, fork and spoon by each. She found herself rather excited over the task. From time to time she stopped to glance in the dirty mirror and rearrange her hair. Her cheeks had more color than usual. She opened the tin of meat and placed this midway between the two plates and then cut off a slice of bread for each of them. Then came the cups; she had almost forgotten the cups. She rinsed them out in the water-pitcher and gave him the one which was not nicked. By the time the water was boiling she was singing to herself.

'Gene came in heavy-eyed and still sleepy.

"Seems like midnight," he commented.

"I don't mind," she answered.

There was some daylight in the room, but she kept the small kerosene lamp burning on the bureau. 'Gene sat down in the only chair, while she sat on the bed. She liked the matter-of-fact way he accepted things. It made her feel as though she had been getting breakfast for him a long time. It gave her the comfort of a past. She poured out his coffee for him.

"Sugar?" she asked.

"Yep."

"How much?"

"Four spoonfuls," he answered with a yawn.

She gave him four heaping spoonfuls and, watching him stir it, forgot to pour her own coffee.

"Ain't ye goneter eat nothin', Bella?"

"Sure," she answered with a blush, "betcher life."

He himself ate heartily. As he drank his coffee, he awakened.

"This knocks the stuffin' outern the Élite," he complimented her.

"Ain't so worse, is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Sh'd say not," he replied. "How 's it seem not to have to get up and go t' work?"

"Fine!" she answered.

"You had n't oughter work nohow," he put in. "You 're too small."

"I did n't useter mind it," she answered.

She had been watching his cup, and the moment it was empty she inquired:

"'Nother on the coffee?"

He handed over his cup and watched as she poured it carefully so as not to stir up the grounds. It certainly gave him a warm glow of satisfaction to be sitting here with her to wait on him. It made him feel at home. It took off the curse of the city. It gave him a fixed point—something to come back to. Like every one with vagabond instincts, he had

really a keener appreciation of home than many of those who never wander. He was no mere gypsy. He relished the sense of stability which comes of having a secure line of retreat. But this was something even better. He felt the pride of being the sole head of the establishment. In every glance, every movement, every word of Bella's he saw her acknowledgment of him as master. He did n't try to get any deeper into her emotions than this. He was content to let the matter rest there, basing it simply on the fact that she was a mere woman and he a man.

"What you goin' to do to-day?" he asked.

It pleased her to have him show this interest. But it raised a new question. What in the world was she going to do? She saw nothing to do but to wait for him to come back from work.

"I dunno," she answered vaguely. "Maybe I'll sit in the park awhile."

"Good idee," he nodded. "Ye oughter get the air."

"What time'll you be home?" she asked.

"'Bout six, I s'pose."

She cut several slices of bread and began to butter them for his lunch.

"You'll come straight home?" she asked without

"You bet," he answered. "This makes a feller want to come home."

She bent lower over her task. She placed thin slices of beef between the bread. Then she took an empty bottle and filled it with cold coffee, adding a generous supply of sugar. He pushed back his chair and rose. She did his lunch up in a newspaper and handed it to him. He took them without a word.

"Maybe you won't like these," she said in an artful attempt to draw some word of praise from him.

"Why not?"

"I dunno. Maybe — Oh, I guess I'm talkin' foolish," she broke off, as she turned back to pick up the things on the table preparatory to washing them.

"Bella," he said, his eyes grown suddenly brilliant, "I like ev'rything ye do."

"So?" she answered carelessly.

"Honest."

"You'd better beat it now," she cut in, putting the table between them. She was afraid of his eyes, afraid of the smile which accompanied that look. Her instincts were highly developed about certain matters. So far he had conducted himself as well as she could ask. Now — well, she did n't blame him. He was a man, after all. And, after all, she was a woman. She was n't afraid of herself,

only she did n't like the idea of having to check him in anything.

"Run 'long 'bout your errands, 'Gene," she said lightly.

"Are n't ye goin' t' say good-by?"

"Good-by," she answered.

He reached across the table and caught her arm. She dropped a cup and raised her eyes to his.

"Let me kiss ye good-by," he pleaded earnestly.

It was difficult to resist the tender smile which accompanied the plea. After all, she could kiss him a good deal as she might kiss a boy. After all — She tried to free herself. He held her firmly. She felt a lump in her throat. Her eyes filled.

"'Gene," she said quietly, "did n't you say you 'd play me fair?"

He dropped her hand and went out. He was neither hurt nor angry. He was honestly half ashamed of himself. But as he went down the street he began to whistle.

**L**IFE on the ocean wave, even though the waves in question consisted only of the choppy breakers within the harbor, agreed with 'Gene. He grew tanned and hardy. The brisk salt air kept him cool even through the heat of the summer, and whetted his appetite to a degree that made serious inroads into his wages. So far as work of any kind was pleasant to him, this was. He considered himself now a genuine seafaring man and resumed his swaggering gait. For a day or two the newness of it all sent his thoughts back to Julie. He recalled the great adventure upon which he had originally started. She was part of that; in fact, the very soul of it. It was she who unconsciously had inspired the undertaking. When he had been turned aside from it, he had been turned aside from her. She had n't figured at all in his new life. He had forgotten completely even the episode of the parting and his hotly spoken words to her. When now he did remember, it was only with a smile. She was an inci-



dent in a youthful dream. He had seen something of life since then. She no more fitted into the events centering around the Élite than Nat did.

But as he recovered his spirits, and while the wallowing old ferry-boat was new enough to separate him from the city streets, he dreamed his pleasant dream over again. For a day or two he returned to his room at night somewhat abstracted and not his genial self. He was curt with Bella and more often than not went to bed directly after supper. The salt breezes, with their whispering reminder of what was to have been, forced a comparison not altogether favorable either to his stuffy room or to her who was always waiting for him. The latter, after her kind, took all the blame upon herself. She felt she had been unnecessarily severe with him; that perhaps the strain of feeling he had her to look out for was too much for him; that perhaps the humble cooking did not agree with him. She was upon the point of suggesting that, after all, perhaps it would be better if she moved somewhere else, when his mood broke. 'Gene was not one to brood long over anything. Once the novelty of the nautical atmosphere wore away and he settled down to the sordid duty of holding his job, little romance remained. As that vanished, Julie vanished with it. He found more of interest in this woman of flesh and blood who

awakened him every morning and smiled her good-night to him just before he tumbled into bed, than in the purely gossamer creature who beckoned him on to a land growing fainter with every passing day.

From this point 'Gene developed a good deal of satisfaction with his position. When he came home at the end of the first week with his ten dollars and handed over five of this to Bella for current expenses, he felt a real pleasure in thus repaying her initial kindness to him.

"Thet makes us square far as money goes, don't it?" he asked.

"Yes 'Gene," she answered.

She waited to see if he had anything further to suggest. Apparently he did n't have. At present he was too well content with the way life was going to desire a change of any sort. But she herself was not quite content. The moment he canceled the debt she sensed a difference in their relation. She felt it in him and felt it within herself. Up to that point the monetary consideration furnished the slight excuse necessary to justify the co-operative arrangement. After that was done away with, it left him in the position of practically supporting her, though she still paid for her own room. She let matters run on so for another week. She was too happy to act at once. She lived each day for the joy of preparing

his breakfast in the morning, of having his dinner ready for him at night. Had it been possible, she would have asked nothing more than the satisfaction of doing this indefinitely. She received her reward in watching him grow stronger and hardier than ever, in seeing his eyes respond to the solid comfort she furnished him in their little mock home, in the occasional smile he bestowed on her and which sent the blood to her cheeks as though she were nothing but a very young girl. And yet she realized all the while that this must end. She knew it must end soon when he returned one night and, stepping up to her in as matter-of-fact a fashion as though they were man and wife, kissed her on the lips. She knew it when she accepted that kiss without protest and went on about her work with her head swimming in delirious joy.

That night after he had gone she sat on the edge of her bed and fought it out with herself. She realized now what her coming here had meant. She loved him. At first she repeated the words to herself scornfully. She who knew men, she who had watched with calm cynicism every coarse side of their nature, had surrendered in the end as meekly as any lass fresh from a convent. Putting the matter to herself in this bald fashion, she hated herself. She pressed her clenched fists into her temples

with hysterical passion. She spared herself nothing until — she recalled how he had smiled into her eyes as he left. Then she sat there quite helpless.

He had been good to her. Except for that kiss — that single kiss — he had played fair with her. He had spoken no word of love to her — had not enticed her on. She had come this far willingly enough — of her own free will. He had given her the joy of these last two weeks and asked nothing in return. He was only a big care-free boy and she — a little fool. If she wanted to love him, whose business was it anyhow? What was the harm in that? She ought to have known what she was getting into. She did know it — knew it from the first. She had gone ahead and deliberately closed her eyes to the truth. Now she must pay for it; that was all. She had better be a good sport than sit there bawling like a quitter.

She undressed and crawled into bed. She felt safer and more comfortable there in the dark. She knew it was absurd to imagine that a man like 'Gene should think of marrying such a little scrawny pale-faced thing as she. Still there was no harm dreaming about it. Supposing he really did want to marry her — that he came and said, "Bella, let's tie up." Why, then they would get a tenement somewhere. They could buy a little furniture on the instalment

plan — they would n't need much. With a real kitchen she would show him what cooking was. There were a lot of things she could make which she knew he would like. She would try to make doughnuts like those he was always talking about, and might even with a little practice do an apple-pie. She would spend all day just cooking the things he liked. It did not matter in the dark whether her cheeks took on color or not. She let herself go. It was rather too bad, however, that a mirror could not have shown her how much younger these thoughts made her.

She would try to persuade him to save his money too. In time he might be promoted on the ferry-boat. He might even be made captain. He deserved to be. She had often jollied Captain Regan on her morning trip to the café and he was n't half the man that 'Gene was.

Then in time — she whispered this thought to herself — in time there might be a kiddy. There might be a little kiddy who looked like 'Gene. He might have sandy hair and blue eyes — a little warm round ball of sandy hair and blue eyes. He would put his arms around her neck and call her "Modder." She was panting. She heard the quick intake of her own breath. She rolled over and buried her face in the pillow.

"Oh, my Gawd!" she moaned. "Oh, my Gawd!"

What was she that she should dream such dreams? She sobbed until exhausted, and went to sleep with her head still buried in the wet pillow.

The worst of it was, as she realized when she came to set the table for breakfast in the morning, that the darned pillow-case was all wrinkled. It made such a shabby-looking tablecloth that she couldn't use it. She took one of her clean handkerchiefs which she had ironed on the mirror that night and spread it at 'Gene's place. She herself would eat off the bare wood. But she didn't mind that. She didn't care whether she ate or not this morning, but she wanted to make this last meal they were to have together as shipshape as possible for him.

While she was waiting for him to come in, she packed her dress-suit case. This didn't take her long. The stove and the dishes she would leave. He could sell them. She folded up her few clothes with her shabby waitress' uniform and a clean white apron on top. Then she shoved the case under the bed where he couldn't see it. She didn't know how much he would mind her going, but he might as well have his breakfast in peace anyway.

He came in heavy as usual from his deep sleep.

"Mornin', Bella," he greeted her.

She turned red at the sight of him, but evidently he did n't remember the episode of last night. At first she was inclined to resent this, but on second thought she realized that this, after all, was better. It made things more comfortable all round.

"Mornin', 'Gene," she answered cheerfully.

He glanced out the window to see what the weather was and in what direction the wind lay.

"Fair an' th' wind norwest," he announced.

With a natural enough desire to please him, she had discovered his weakness for being considered a real sailor and catered to this little vanity.

"Smooth sea to-day, 'Gene?"

"A leetle choppy," he opined, "prob'ly a good ground swell outside the harbor."

"I'm glad your ship don't haveter butt into that," she said.

"Would n't mind none if she was built fer it," he declared.

"I was lookin' at the Thomas R. Sullivan yesterday," she said. "She ain't one, two, three with th' Michael Regan."

"The Sullivan ain't nothin' but an old tub," he answered. "We can beat her a boat's length across the harbor any day."

"I betcher," she answered. "There's somethin' swell erbout the Regan."

He took his place at the table. She had warmed over the beef stew he had so enjoyed last night. For his luncheon she had prepared a little surprise in the shape of an apple-pie. It was baker's pie, to be sure, but she knew he would like it. She had hidden it in the bottom of the tin lunch-box she bought for him the other day. With it she had packed away a piece of cheese, three or four sandwiches, and a couple of doughnuts. On top of this she had another surprise—a five-cent cigar. She was glad that these extra attentions happened to come on the day she was leaving.

He ate his breakfast with a relish. When he had finished, he asked his usual question:

“What ye goin’ to do to-day?”

“I dunno,” she answered.

He had a little surprise of his own.

“Better come down this afternoon and ride with me,” he suggested.

“Ride with you? On the boat?”

He nodded as grandly as though he were both owner and captain.

She shook her head.

“We can’t stand the price, ’Gene.”

“I’ll tend to that,” he answered. “O’Toole said he’d pass ye in.”

“Pass me in? Then I could ride all th’ afternoon? Jus’ as long as I wanted?”



He nodded. This opportunity was a sore temptation. During this last week she had spent half her time sitting in the park watching the old ark steam back and forth, straining her eyes for a glimpse of 'Gene. A return trip cost only four cents, but four cents would buy almost half a dozen doughnuts for him, so she had forced herself to remain content on shore. It was a cruel fate which gave her this chance at just this time. But if she were going she might as well go at once. She would n't dare risk another evening here with him, especially after such a holiday excursion as that. It would make it twice as hard to leave.

"No," she answered. "I guess I won't."

"'Fraid o' bein' seasick?" he demanded with the jesting wink of your tried sailor.

She smiled to herself. He did n't remember that she had been going back and forth on that Ferry for several years before she met him. Still she did not propose to destroy the flavor of his little joke. She made up a face.

"I ain't takin' no chances," she returned.

"Oh, come 'long," he urged. "Ye'll get used to it in a trip or two."

"Dry land's good 'nuff for mine," she replied in order to prolong his relish of the situation.

He laughed heartily.

"Never yet seed a woman who ware n't skeered of th' water," he declared.

He rose and reached for his lunch-box.

"Ye 'd better come," he insisted, as she handed it to him.

She shook her head. He was surprised at her stubbornness.

"'Gene," she said slowly, "I 'm goneter vamoose."

He could hardly believe his ears.

"You? You meanter say you 're leavin'?"

"Right, th' first time," she nodded.

Instead of standing there before him she returned to the table and in as matter-of-fact a fashion as possible began to clear away the dishes.

"I 'll clean house for yer. An' I 'll leave all these cookin' things in your room. Maybe you 'll get yer own breakfasts."

He strode towards her.

"Be you crazy, Bella?" he exclaimed.

"I dunno. Maybe I am. But I 'll bet a dollar to a lead nickel I 'd be headed for the daffy house sure if I did n't go."

"What ye mean?" he stammered.

It was long since anything had so confused him as this possibility of her leaving. He had thought her a fixture. The bottom seemed to drop out of everything. He felt already the cold curse of city loneliness.

"You 're allers askin' what I means when I puts it to you straight," she replied.

She stopped her work and faced him.

"You don't need a dictionary to get at what I mean when I talks to you, 'Gene."

"But ye was all right yesterday. What ye quit-tin' for?"

"'Cause I 'm sick o' loafin', for one thing," she answered.

"S'posin' ye do go to work, can't ye stay here jus' the same?"

"No," she answered.

She lowered her eyes and continued her household duties.

He thought rapidly for a moment. He was half frightened and half irritated. He did n't like these interruptions in his life when things were going so smoothly. He put down his lunch-box and watched her in silence. He saw her grow uneasy under his gaze. She kept her back to him as much as possible.

"Ye gen'rally say what ye mean," he said, "but this time thar 's suthin' more ye ain't told."

"Gee, but you 're the wizard," she answered lightly.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She raised her head again at this.

"Run along an' sell yer papers, 'Gene."

"I won't till ye tell me."

"Then you 'll stay there till Hell freezes over."

"No, I won't."

He was growing imperious. He approached her and laid his big hands upon her shoulders.

"Now, Bella — what 's ailin' ye?"

"Nothin'," she answered mildly.

"What ye quittin' for?"

"'Cause — 'cause — " she felt pitifully weak under the pressure of his grip — "'Cause — Oh, 'Gene, we 've been good pals. Now don't go for to spoil it all."

"You 're the one who 's spoilin' it," he answered.

"No! no!" she replied breathlessly. "That 's why I 've gotter go — to keep it from spoilin'!"

"Look up," he ordered.

She tried to squirm free.

"Look up."

"I don't want'er."

"Look up."

"I — I — "

She looked up. For a moment he stared into her brown eyes. Then he smiled.

"You are n't goin'," he said.

She felt herself weakening.

"You are n't goin'," he repeated.

"What you mean?" she asked with a startled cry.

"Who 's talkin' English now?"

"But I've gotter go. Oh, my Gawd, I've gotter go right off."

He smiled again, showing his white irregular teeth. He was very confident now.

"Ye 'll stay right here an' we won't need but one room, I reckon."

In a frenzy she fought him. He held her without effort.

"Easy, easy," he warned. "Leave 'nuff of me to get to a Justice of th' Peace."

She ceased her struggling and, gripping his two arms like a drowning woman, she met his eyes.

"'Gene," she gasped — "you mean —"

"That I'm goneter marry ye whether ye want to or not."

She sank to the floor. He picked her up and held her lips to his lips.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *A Glimpse of Paradise*

WHEN Nat regained consciousness enough to know or care where he was, he found himself in a very wide four-posted bed in a very large room. He recognized neither the bed nor the room. Near the bed stood a table covered with bottles. By the slant of the sun-rays flooding in beneath the half-drawn curtains he judged that it was well into the morning. He started to rise, but he fell back weakly without being able even to make his elbow. This was certainly a peculiar state of affairs for one who had never been sick in his life and who had never slept away from home. He tried to figure it out, and in the process fell asleep once more.

When he awoke for the second time, his head was clearer, but he was not even then fully prepared for the vision which greeted his eyes. Within an arm's length of him stood Julie. She was dressed in white muslin and wore no hat. She seemed as much at home in this strange room as though she belonged here. She appeared to be startled at sight of his wide-open eyes; perhaps she was afraid. He closed

them again. Then he felt that she had crept still nearer to him. He heard her voice — a trembling whisper.

“ Nat.”

“ That you, Julie ? ” he asked.

He felt her warm fingers upon his hand.

“ Nat, Nat, Nat,” she repeated in excited wonder.

He opened his eyes once more. She was bending over him, her sweet face alight with glad greeting. He could n’t understand it. He remembered dimly, like some half-forgotten nightmare, that the last time, whenever that was, wherever it was, she had been afraid of him. He stared about the room in an attempt to connect the past with the present.

“ Where am I, Julie ? ”

“ You ’re here, Nat,” she answered eagerly.

That sounded like an indisputable statement, but he would have been inclined to believe her if she had said he was n’t. Admitting, however, that she was correct, was “ Here ” some nook in paradise or a corner in some more matter-of-fact locality ? On the whole, in spite of her presence, he was inclined to accept the latter view. He looked to her for further information. He was too weak even to think for himself.

“ Don’t — don’t you remember, Nat ? ” she asked, her warm fingers still resting on his.

"I remember somethin'. I had a cold and you were skeered."

She pressed his hand.

"Please — please don't remember that," she pleaded.

"And you —"

She placed her fingers hurriedly over his lips.

"The doctor said you were to remain very quiet," she warned, "very, very quiet."

"Who said that?"

"Dr. Swanzey. You've been sick. You were brought up here to my room."

"This — this is your room?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. And please don't talk any more. Please don't *think* any more."

He looked about him again — this time in some awe. Then he closed his eyes.

"If you could go to sleep again," she coaxed.

"Will you stay here?"

"Yes. Right by your side, Nat. I — I won't move."

He did n't know whether he went on dreaming that she was here or whether she actually remained. It did n't matter much. In either case he felt very drowsily content. Whenever he half opened his eyes, he saw either a vision or Julie herself.

So an hour passed, and when the old doctor en-



tered, life became more real but none the less pleasant. The doctor felt his pulse and took his temperature, and with a smile nodded back to the waiting girl. He was a portly, white-bearded old man with a face which might have served as a model for a figure of "human kindness." It was at once child-like and strong — the strength being hidden, however, beneath the beard, so that all one saw was the mild brown eyes that gathered many little wrinkles in the corners whenever he smiled, which was often. When he was through with his examination, Nat asked him a question.

"Can I get up?"

"Up?" stormed Dr. Swanzey in reply. "If I catch you trying it, I'll put ye back if I have to use an axe."

"I hate t' stay in bed with nothin' but a cold," objected Nat.

"A cold? You've had pneumonia — that's what you've had if ye want to know. And if it had n't been for this angel of light here —"

The angel of light turned away so that Nat could n't see her face.

"If it had n't been for this angel of light, you'd been by now where *I* could n't do ye any good."

"Guess I've been a lot of bother," Nat apolo-

"Ye have, son — sure 's thar 's a God in Israel. Ye 've skeered the tar out of three families — including my own. So the thing for you to do now is to lie back and keep quiet instead of talking about getting up."

"I will," Nat agreed mildly.

"And when you 're well I want to know just what fool thing you did to get such a cold. Then I want an affidavit swearing ye won't do it again."

The angel of light was moving towards the door with an abruptness that suggested a precipitous retreat.

"Julie," Nat called.

She turned.

"I s'pose you 're going now."

Dr. Swanzey looked from his patient to the girl and then back again to his patient. He saw a light in the latter's eyes which brought the little wrinkles to the corners of his own. He had half opened his black leather medicine case with a view to adding a mild tonic to his other prescriptions. He closed it again with a snap. He turned back to Nat.

"Mind what I say, now; don't stir a toe out of that bed till I give the word."

He strode towards the girl at the door. He bent close to her ear.

"I prescribe for him, you — as much as he can stand."

Her ears instantly became two pretty pink cameos.

"Before meals and after meals," he added, "and just before retiring."

He lightly patted her back, and went off down the stairs chuckling to himself. She was sore tempted to follow him. In the first place she wished to correct his mistake; in the second place she knew that Nat would notice her scarlet ears.

"Julie," he called.

"Y-yes," she answered.

"You can go."

"It's about time for your mother and father to get here. Do you want me to watch for them to come down the road?"

He had forgotten for the moment that he had a mother and father. It sent his thoughts back home, and this gave him his connecting link between the past and the present. He remembered now how he had left the house to come down here to find Julie.

"Do you, Nat?" she asked.

"Yes."

She hurried off, and left him to retrace in his mind the incident which led him to the top of the mountain and back. This girl here did n't seem like

her who in hate and fear had fought to free herself from his arms. Nor did she seem like the school-marm he had known before that. She came nearer to her whom, in his heart, he had taken into the winter woods with him — like her and yet different too. That was the wonder of Julie; she changed from month to month, from week to week, and yet she remained always the same. She was always Julie. Through all the changes the central figure remained fixed; through all the changes he knew her better, loved her better.

In the afternoon his father and mother came and spent an hour with him. He was glad to see them, but the effort of talking left him exhausted. He drowsed until night after this, and then fell into a deep sleep which lasted until morning.

He awoke so refreshed that when Silas Moulton came up to see him before breakfast he had already made his plans for going home. But the former checked him before he had spoken a dozen words. He was a lean, wiry little man, with a keen face, and eyes as black as Julie's.

"You don't leave this house till you're sound as a nut, my boy," he announced with decision.

"I'm makin' a lot of bother," said Nat.

"So you are, so you are. I reckon if you did n't I'd never forgive you. Your father went to enough

bother for me once to save my life, and I've never yet had a chance to pay him back."

Nat remembered the story. It was after the battle of Bull Run. His father, though wounded himself, had shouldered his injured comrade and carried him off the field, where he undoubtedly would have been trampled to death. Nat was glad enough to let this be an excuse for his further stay, although he knew well enough none was needed. There was n't a more hospitable man in St. Croix than Silas Moulton.

A little later Julie herself came in with his breakfast. She took away his breath, she looked so daintily fresh, so wonderfully beautiful. Clad in a blue and white checked calico dress, with a snow-white apron over this, her eyes clear as morning stars and her cheeks a dark crimson, her black hair marvelously neat and silken, he found himself stammering when he tried to say merely good-morning. She was a picture a man needed his full strength to gaze upon steadily.

She placed the tray on a table and helped him to sit up. While she bolstered the big pillows behind his back she was so sweetly near to him that his white face suddenly flamed into a scarlet as brilliant as hers. Then she placed the tray in his lap with the injunction that he must eat every mouthful.

"'Cause look at your arm," she concluded.

He looked at his arm. It did look small, but it felt still smaller. He could barely raise it.

"You must get strong again just as soon as ever you can. I hardly know you, Nat — when you're not strong."

"I'll be all right in a day or two," he answered.

But he knew that as soon as he was he must leave her; so, after all, he had no great ambition in the matter. She stood over him until he drank his glass of milk and ate most of the egg on toast with a taste or two of jelly. Then she sat on the foot of the bed and chattered about one thing and another, while he listened not to what she said but to the music of her voice. Several times she caught him doing nothing else but that. She then stopped abruptly with a chiding,

"Nat!"

Whereupon he dutifully swallowed another mouthful. He could hardly be blamed for not caring to eat during his first hour or two in this new world to which he had awakened. And it was a new world. Everything was intensified; the sun was brighter and warmer than he had ever known it; the air was fresher and sweeter; all colors were keener and more brilliant. In the midst of it she stood out like a new creation.

So for a week Nat lived lazily, drowsily, deliciously in this humble paradise. Julie flitted in and out between the dawn and the twilight and was very good to him. While she was in the room he gave himself up completely to the present, and during the intervals she was out of sight he dreamed into the future. Out of the latter two ambitions slowly crystalized. One of these was very practicable; he meant next winter to conduct his own lumber operations on Eagle. Last year Judge Martin had offered him an option on some standing pine, and had agreed to take in payment his notes running to the end of the logging season. He had shaken his head. He was not then on his own feet. But now — as soon as he was strong enough to get out he meant to see the judge. The other scheme had been until now nothing but a wild fancy. It was not based on business or sense. But he determined none the less to fulfill it. His father had given him on his twenty-first birthday a plot of land on the crest of the hill just above the old homestead. He meant to erect there a house of his own. A vagrant artist, pausing there to set up his easel the summer before Julie came to Hio to teach, had furnished Nat his inspiration.

“Just one big room,” the fellow had said, as Nat came over from the plow field to watch him, “just one big room and a little room off this for the

kitchen. Then a broad flight of stairs sweeping to a snug bed or two under the eaves. That is all — that is enough. A fireplace at one end of the big room, possibly, and a piazza facing the west. Windows everywhere. So, my lad, a man could live with his maid and his God very pleasantly, eh?"

So a man could live with his maid and his God very pleasantly. The idea had appealed to Nat at once. With the succeeding months and Julie's black eyes, the idea had ever burned in the back of his mind. It was the next best thing to a home on the summit of Eagle. The simplicity of it appealed to him. The man had summed it up well, "With his maid and his God." That was all the company Nat craved, and so far as any very concrete notion went, he could get along without the latter except as expressed in the sky, the trees, the rolling sweep of forest, and the decent standards of his own heart.

As soon as he was able to leave his bed and get out of doors, he recovered his strength rapidly. At the end of another week he felt that he could no longer pose as a sick man and retain his self-respect. An incident which occurred late one afternoon when he was returning from a long walk with Julie made such a position more than ever ridiculous. They were strolling home through the big pasture, when



they came face to face with a yearling bull which Mr. Moulton had that day turned loose. The animal was vicious and charged them at once. With a terrified scream Julie took to her heels, but was stopped in her tracks by an order from Nat.

"Stand where ye are!" he commanded.

She obeyed, though her knees trembled beneath her. Nat easily enough drew off the attack, and then faced the brute, who with lowered head was preparing for a second charge.

"Ye'd better not," Nat warned him, much as though the bull were a mischievous small boy.

With eyes aflame, the animal pawed the ground uncertainly. Nat walked directly towards him. The bull with a nervous bellow backed off. Nat followed, and with a quick dive seized the brute by the horns. He gave a sharp turn to the right, twisting the short thick neck in that direction. For the matter of ten seconds the two stood immovable in this pose — the bull straining to recover his balance, Nat bearing down with relentless strength. Then suddenly the man threw in the weight of his body, and the yearling sank to his knees. With this advantage Nat gave one more twist, which brought out a roar of pain and sent the bull to his side. It was easy enough to hold the gasping brute in that

"May — may I run now?" begged Julie.

"No," answered Nat, "don't run. Come here."

"Oh," she pleaded, "I — I can't, Nat."

"There's no danger. Come here."

She felt as though those same arms which had so relentlessly forced the bull to his side were now forcing her. She came — staggering as she walked, she came. As she stood by his side, he said:

"You oughter get used to animals, Julie. They don't mean no harm."

"I — I want to run, Nat," she confessed.

He was patting the sleek neck and rubbing behind the limp ears.

"See — thar's nothin' ails him except he's plumb full of life. Put your hand on his head."

An hour ago she would have called the act an utter impossibility. She stooped and placed her fingers for a second on the throbbing neck.

"Good!" he praised her. "Now stand back a little."

"You — you are n't going to turn him loose?"

"Why not?" he asked.

"But —"

"You can run, Julie, if you're scared."

For a moment she hesitated. She glanced at the fence a hundred yards away. Nat waited.

"I'll hold him till you're over," he said.

She stepped back a pace or two, clenched her fists, and said:

"I'll stay here."

"Then — steady," he called.

He loosened his hold and sprang to a position in front of her, alert as a cougar for a possible attack. But, as he thought, the youngster had learned his lesson. With a snort of disgust the bull scrambled to his feet, turned tail, and ran. Nat laughed.

"Look at him go!" he exclaimed. "Hi — yi!"

With each shout the bull let out another link until he finally disappeared behind a distant clump of trees. When Nat turned, he found Julie somewhat pale-cheeked but smiling.

"I stayed — did n't I?" she said, eagerly looking to him for approbation.

"I thought ye would," he answered.

"And now — and now I guess I'll take your arm."

He helped her over the fence. On the other side she sat down quite out of breath.

But the incident had given Nat the consciousness of his shoulder muscles again, and with that he realized the work for which they were made and which was awaiting his return. He determined upon the spot to leave in the morning.

"Julie," he said abruptly, "I'm going back to-morrow."

"Back — where?" she asked in astonishment.

"Home," he answered.

For a moment her eyes rested on his, and then she answered in some confusion at her stupidity:

"Why, of course, Nat."

For a breath or two she had forgotten that he had another home. She turned away her head.

"I'm goin' to build a house," he announced next.

"Yes?" she asked, resolved not to be surprised at anything else he might say.

"A house of my own — on top of the hill."

"That is a fine place for a house," she nodded.

"I don't know how long it will take me 'cause I want to build it all myself."

She glanced up swiftly.

"I should think it would take you years," she answered.

He laughed uneasily.

"I feel now as though I could do it in a week," he said.

"Then you must be planning a very small house," she concluded.

"Just big enough for two," he answered slowly.

She found her cheeks growing scarlet. She started to rise.

"Julie," he called, reaching for her arm and checking her.

"Yes, Nat."

"When it's done — when it's done, I'm coming back here and —"

"Nat," she interrupted.

"Yes?" he asked eagerly.

"You mustn't say what you were going to say."

"You know what I mean?"

She turned impulsively and placed her hand upon his arm.

"Nat," she said hurriedly, "we've been good friends. Let's stay just good friends. I like you just as you are — big and strong and kind. Somehow you seem like the best friend I have in the world."

He seized her hand.

"That's enough," he said.

"You don't understand," she faltered. "Oh, Nat, don't make me hurt you."

"I guess you're allers goin' to hurt," he answered, "but it does n't seem to make any difference."

"If you only knew," she cried helplessly.

"Knew what?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you. I must n't tell you. You must

just take my word that — that we can't ever be anything but the best of friends."

"I would n't take any one's word for that," he replied determinedly.

She drew away from him. With head bent low, she clasped her hands in her lap. He rose and stood before her.

"I would n't take any one's word for that," he repeated. "Maybe I'll have to wait. Maybe I'll have to wait a long time, but some day, sure's fate, you're coming up into that house."

She struggled to her feet.

"Nat," she cried, "you must n't say such things. You have no right."

"Maybe not," he answered, "but I can't help sayin' them. I jus' want to tell ye what I know, Julie."

"Know?" she demanded wildly. "How do you know?"

"I've known it ever since that night on the mountain," he answered.

"But that," she hid her face, "that was all an accident. And even then — Oh, Nat, you're making an awful mistake."

"No," he answered. "Here ye stand — you and me. If any one tries to take you away, they've got to get by me. They've got to get by me, an' they

could n't do it, Julie. Don't ye see?" he asked very simply.

His body had stiffened, so that when she stared at him he truly did look a formidable barrier. He was some primeval fighting man who could have borne her away right there and then had he chosen. For a second she felt absolutely helpless; for a second she was glad of her helplessness. This seemed to solve the whole difficulty. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

"They 'd have to fight hard to get you away from me," he said.

Trembling beneath his hand, she believed him. She threw up her head.

"Oh!" she exclaimed below her breath.

From the house came her mother's voice calling her. She jumped back, as though to escape from some great danger. Then, with another startled glance at Nat, she took to her heels and ran.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *The Builder*

NAT came from the home of Julie Moulton to the home of his birth, and felt like an outcast from them both. Neither seemed any more like home than the log cabin which had sheltered him last winter. There was nothing of himself in either of them. They were like last year's birds'-nests.

He took up the routine work of the farm at once, but each day left him as restless as a lost dog. He found it impossible to remain indoors, where the talk was largely of 'Gene, and so often walked miles in an effort to tire himself into a stupor. Twice during that week he covered the fifteen miles to St. Croix, and after standing a moment before the Moulton house walked home again. Then by degrees his hot thoughts came into some sort of order, and he realized that before he would ever know again the meaning of home the home must be his own. Then it was that his brain was quickened with the great passion — the passion of the builder, of the creator. Then it was that he became one with



the vagrant artist — one with all artists, for that matter. He must build and into the building he must put himself.

He threw himself at once into the plans. With a sheet of blue-lined writing-paper before him he sat up until dawn one night drawing and figuring. And though he was alone, with only the loud-ticking kitchen clock for company, it seemed to him that Julie was bending over his shoulder all the while. He could almost feel her warm breath, almost feel the velvet brush of her cheeks. Hours passed like minutes in a glow perfumed by her presence. Neither sleep nor bodily fatigue had any power over him. He was in the mood out of which are born great symphonies, great pictures. Yet, when he was through, his paper revealed only a roughly drawn parallelogram with little indentations and a column or two of thick black figures. That was all. It was like a child's drawing. And yet, if one had the eyes to see, it was the most wonderful sketch of a home ever drawn. It contained everything of brave strength, of deep loyalty, of pure purpose, of honest sincerity. It was built with the freshness of the dawn, painted with the glory of the sunset. Every window contained a dream, and every door was hallowed by tiny figures which moved in and out with honest laughter. Julie stood by his shoulder and

smiled down at him and whispered that it was very good. He tumbled into bed for an hour's sleep that night and woke up refreshed and reborn. The next day he ordered his lumber, and the following morning went to the crest of the hill with a ball of twine, a handful of stakes, and his shovel.

He drove the first stake with the arrival of the first gray streak of light on the horizon line. The act had all the grave dignity of a prayer. When he lifted his head again towards the east, it was as though Julie had been there and had kissed him. Then it seemed to him as though the gates at the four points of the compass were suddenly thrown open. The world grew big, infinitely big. Had he been a poet, he could have written a fine poem at that moment; had he been an artist, he could have painted a great picture; had he been a musician, he could have caught a masterful symphony. As it was, he could only sense those glories without holding them. He saw visions without being able to interpret the visions. The most he was conscious of was a broadening joy, a triumphant peace that passed his understanding. He squared his shoulders, and for a moment stood there bewildered by it all, joyously confused as he had been when he had spoken to her in the pasture. Then he measured off forty feet and drove his second stake.

He worked that morning until breakfast, and then took up the regular toil of the day. That evening, after he had done his milking and fed and watered the stock for the night, he came back to the crest of the hill. It was then that his father came up and began to question.

"What ye about, Nat?" he asked.

Without stopping, Nat answered simply:

"I'm building a house."

"A house?" queried the father.

"A house," answered Nat.

For a few moments his father watched him curiously. He could n't understand.

"Be ye goneter get married?" the father finally asked.

"Yes," answered Nat.

"To the schoolmarm?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know. I have n't asked her yet."

Joshua sat down on a rock and lighted his pipe. With his elbows on his knees, he looked on until dark. When Nat picked up his tools to leave, his father joined him.

"Thar's room enough to home," said his father.

"Not for Julie and me," answered Nat.

When Mrs. Page heard, her eyes grew moist.

"She'll make ye a good wife," she said.

The next morning again at dawn, Nat turned the first shovelful of earth. That night his father appeared again and offered to help. But Nat refused the offer. From cellar to attic he had determined that this should be the work of his hands and his alone. And so the father sat and watched Nat struggle with a rock that weighed half a ton; saw him heave and strain till the veins on his forehead swelled into whipcords.

"Don't be a tarnation fool," said the father, as Nat paused.

The old man rose to throw his weight on the end of the lever. Nat shook his head.

"Leave it be!" he ordered.

Joshua sat down, and in the end saw the rock toppled over into place. He saw the sweat and the strain, but he could n't see the joy. Day after day he watched, and saw with admiration feats of strength that would have tested the capacity of any other two men in town, but that was all he saw. He understood no more of the deep happiness of the fight than a man can understand that which lies below and hallows and soothes the travail of a woman in labor. He saw his son grow leaner than ever, saw his forearms grow as hard as the hind legs of an ox, and saw the foundation laid

and the floor timbers in place before the end of the month.

Every Sunday Nat harnessed up the colt and drove to St. Croix. There he was received by the father and mother of Julie Moulton as one of the family. There he was received by Julie at first with some uneasiness, but later, as he did not refer again to the talk in the pasture, with a certain eagerness. He came like a breeze from the top of Eagle, and he freshened up her memory of 'Gene.

Nat liked the evenings best. Then the four of them used to gather on the big granite slabs that made the front stoop; Julie cuddling against her mother's side on the top step, and Nat and Silas below. Nat often sat so near to her that his elbow brushed her white skirt. The older people grew reminiscent at such times, and Mrs. Moulton told much of her early life in the convent at Montreal. Sometimes Julie sang the songs her mother had learned there and had taught her. They were light French chansons, and her voice was well suited to them. Nat could n't understand the words, but that did n't matter. The music was enough. It expressed a great deal of what was in his own heart, and left him more eager than ever to get back to his house. He learned many of the tunes and often whistled them while at work.

In this way the summer passed and the house took form. It was unlike anything to be seen within a hundred miles of St. Croix. On the first floor there was one big room with a large stone fireplace, and off this a little room for the kitchen. Upstairs, again, there was only one big room where there should have been three or four. Around three sides of the house was a piazza ten feet deep. The building, instead of facing the road as every honest house should, fronted nothing but the valley and the mountains.

By the first week in September the roof had been shingled, the sides clapboarded, and the windows all put in. This left nothing to be done but the finish of the interior. Still Nat told Julie nothing about his house. He had no idea of making a secret of it, but it did n't seem to matter just now whether she knew or not. He wished to have it ready, that was all. When she came back to school, she would see for herself and this would save words.

School was to open the second Monday in September, and that week Nat worked harder than ever. With the aid of lamps he worked far into the night in his anxiety to have the house all done to show her when she returned. His father thought his son had lost his wits. He rose from a troubled sleep one evening, dressed, and went up there. It was almost

eleven. Nat was just finishing the plastering of the ceiling.

"Any one 'd think ye was goneter git married to-morrer," scowled his father.

"So?" answered Nat.

He rested his arm a moment. It ached from finger-tip to shoulder-blade.

"Be ye?" persisted the old man.

"No," answered Nat.

"When then?"

"I don't know."

"Won't she set the day?"

"No."

Nat resumed his work.

"Let me finish thet for ye," said his father.

"I'll have it done in another hour," answered Nat.

His arm cast fantastic shadows on the walls. Joshua watched them with an uncanny feeling. Without another word he remained there until Nat finished and blowing out the lights staggered back home.

The next morning was Sunday, the day he was to go to St. Croix and drive her home. He rose at dawn and raked up the space around the house and swept all the floors. The rooms were barren enough without furniture, but when the sun flooded

in they looked very warm and tidy. It did n't take a very vivid imagination to supply the chairs and tables, especially when he knew just where he was to get them. In three weeks there was to be an auction at the Lovell place, and he figured that he had just about money enough left to buy there the things he needed. If possible, he meant to persuade Julie to drive over with him and help pick them out.

That forenoon Nat hitched the colt in the two-seated wagon, so that there would be plenty of room behind for her trunk. It was a fair crisp day, with the smell of nuts in the air, and he went over the road to St. Croix as though behind a Pegasus. Julie's trunk was all packed, and she was dressed in a new dark-blue suit. With the excitement of the journey in prospect coloring her cheeks, she looked very much like a bride. Nat was too impatient to be off to enjoy his dinner, though for the occasion Mrs. Moulton had quite outdone herself. It seemed to him that the meal would never end. Even after this Julie was an hour in getting together odds and ends before she was ready to take his hand and mount the seat beside him. In spite of all these delays they were on the road by three o'clock. It was the first time they had been alone together since that afternoon in the pasture. Both were conscious of this fact. They did not speak until they had left



the scattering houses behind and had plunged into the first long silent stretch of fragrant pines. Then Julie relaxed a little from her stiff position by Nat's side, and looking up to see what he was about, found his eyes upon her.

"It seems good to be taking you back, Julie," he said.

"I'm not getting back; I'm going away," she reminded him.

"I always think of you as gettin' back when you come near Eagle," he said.

She looked away uneasily. There was a steady self-confident air about him that disturbed her. She could n't say it displeased her, but at the same time it made her decidedly uncomfortable. It made her distinctly conscious of his bigness and, in proportion, of her own weakness.

"I'm getting back to school, if that's what you mean," she answered feebly.

"You're gettin' back home," he said.

"But I'm not, Nat," she insisted, as though, if she did not make this perfectly clear, he might by some magic make it a reality.

"Do you remember what I told ye before I came away?"

"I remember that I told you to forget all you said," she answered.

"Ye might as well have told me to stop breathing," he answered.

She glanced up at him and found his eyes full upon her. They did not flinch. With a flush she turned away from them. They were wonderfully clear eyes. They differed from 'Gene's in that there was never any mystery about them. She shivered a little, and he tucked the buffalo robe more tightly about her. There was something infinitely tender in the very motions of his hand. She smiled her thanks at him.

It was this which encouraged him to confide in her a bit of news second in importance to the house alone.

"The judge has taken my notes for that pine on Eagle."

"Good!" she exclaimed. "Then you'll be your own boss this winter?"

"This winter, anyhow," he answered.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, for his face had grown sober.

"I've got a little less than an even chance to win out," he answered.

"If you have that much of a chance, I'll bet on you, Nat," she replied sincerely.

"To meet the notes I've got to get a lot of timber down the mountain, into the river, and down the river before the water drops."

"You will, you will," she answered eagerly, catching the inspiration of the contest.

This was just the sort of thing any one would back him to do. She saw that even as he voiced his difficulties to her, his jaws came together.

"Yes," he said, "I'll do it."

His eyes had been leveled straight ahead, and now they turned to meet hers. They brought her heart to her throat and left her tingling all over. She felt the thrill of one who for the first time handles the lever of some powerful machine.

"But I shall want you with me," he said.

She started.

"I'll be with you all I can," she answered.

"I don't think I'd have tried if it had n't been for you."

"For me? Why, Nat, why —"

"If it had n't been for you," he repeated, and turned away his eyes.

She was very silent the rest of the journey. She was afraid to speak, almost afraid to think. Her thoughts went wild. If she had been alone, she would have sung to relieve her feelings. So they came to the foot of Hio Hill, and the wagon began to creak up the long incline. As they neared the schoolhouse, he said:

"That's been a mighty lonesome-lookin' building since you left."

She glanced swiftly beyond, to the place where she had said good-by to 'Gene. She was half in hope that she could pass that spot now without emotion, but she found herself turning first cold, then hot. She edged a little away from Nat and sat very erect. She felt like jumping out and running into the woods, but the horse plodded steadily on, like Fate. And like some fateful mirror, she saw once again every detail of that hour when she had let herself go into the strong arms of 'Gene. The memory of it made her feel faint. She closed her eyes — closed them tight — and forced herself to remember not only that but all that led up to it and the promise at the end. She did not open them again until the horse drew up into the yard and she heard Nat's voice. There was a quality in it which brought her very quickly to herself.

"This," he said, "this is yours — when ye want it, Julie."

She was staring, not at the Miller house, but at a new building on the crest of the hill. It was long and low and it faced the west. It was just such a house as she had dreamed about, just such a house as a bride might dream about.

She clutched Nat's arm.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I built it for you this summer."

"You — you —"

But her eyes grew misty, and her voice choked.

"Want to go in and look at it?" he asked eagerly

She drew a deep breath. Then she answered quickly:

"No, no, no. I — I would n't dare, Nat. I would n't dare. Please turn round — *right now.*'

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *God Joins Together*

THE shifty-eyed gentleman recommended to 'Gene by the landlady as a Justice of the Peace who performed the functions of his office at bargain rates for all friends of hers certainly did his duty in the present instance both reasonably and expeditiously. In less than ten minutes after 'Gene and Bella appeared in his rat-hole of an office he declared them to be man and wife, and issued to the girl a certificate announcing to all whom it might concern that she, Bella Agnes Parmelee, spinster, had on May third been united in the bans of holy wedlock to one 'Gene Thomas Page, longshoreman. As Bella received the paper, she lifted her face to be kissed by her husband. At that moment even Justice Barney was conscious of a slight thrill as he saw the plain face of rather an ordinary-looking girl suddenly flash beautiful. He hurriedly tucked his three dollars away in his wallet, almost as though fearing he might be tempted to bestow them upon her as a wedding gift. He was disturbed by such miracles.

For that matter, so was 'Gene. He had entered into this compact merely as the easiest way of preserving his comfort, but now he seemed to catch a hint of something more serious. When he came out of the dingy office into the sunshine with Bella clinging to his arm, he was at first sober and then suddenly elated. He felt quite proud of her and equally proud of himself. There was something in her joyful dependence that glorified him. He came back to the rooms distinctly well pleased with himself. He threw himself down in a chair with a comfortable grunt of content, while Bella whisked off her bonnet and proceeded to get his supper.

"This is something like," he observed, as he began to fill his corncob pipe.

The next evening after work he started with her in search of a flat. They did not have a very wide range of choice, and before dark decided on four rooms not far back from the Ferry. The rent was ten dollars a month. The following day Bella bought, on the instalment plan, what furniture they needed, and two days later they were fairly settled in their new home.

Though there was plenty to do in the flat, Bella at the same time managed to enjoy her honeymoon trip. She took at least a half-dozen rides each day on the Michael Regan. Doubtless many brides have

made longer journeys on more ambitious craft, but even so they couldn't have been any prouder or happier. When one is so utterly and completely happy as to be ever on the verge of tears, why, that is the ultimate, and whether one be the wife of a prince or a pauper makes no great difference. From her seat in the bow, Bella watched her big husband at his duties, and thrilled every time he balanced himself on the snub-nosed point of the vessel as he made ready to heave the rope and make all fast when they neared the wharf. She had never seen a braver man, and as the busy horde hurried past him she wondered why they did not each and all stop to admire! Many of them did. There was a saucy shop-girl or two who did it rather openly, but they only made Bella prouder by their glances. It gave her a queenly sense of ownership. They might look at him as a cat may look at a king, but he was hers — all hers. She felt like the hostess of the vessel. As far as she was concerned, 'Gene was owner, captain, and engineer. Those who scrambled on and off did so by his grace.

But again, whether bride of a prince or pauper, honeymoons must end. At the end of a week she sternly forbore all further extravagance and attended strictly to her duties at home. In the first place she must learn to cook. They had been living



largely on baker's stuff, but 'Gene did so much talking about the good things he used to have at home that she bought a second-hand cook book and started to master this science. She had had no training at home, so that her first attempts were sorry failures. She produced one evening an apple-pie that had every outward appearance of being a very good apple-pie. But 'Gene had no sooner tasted the first mouthful than he shoved away his plate.

"Is n't it good?" she trembled.

"Next time take the leather out of one of my old shoes for the crust," he answered. "Gee, this would kill a horse."

"I worked all the afternoon on it," she assured him.

"Tastes like ye'd worked six months on it," he replied.

"I guess I did n't put in lard 'nuff," she apologized. "But lard is awfully high, 'Gene."

"Ye'd better give up. Buy the next one at the bakeshop."

Bella's lips came together as she suppressed a sob, but she had no idea of giving up. That was n't her way. The next morning she made another, but it was n't much better. She threw it in the fire and, investing a few cents she had put away for some gingham for new aprons, bought another pound of

lard. This time she met with fair success. She ventured, at any rate, to produce it that night for dinner, and had the tremendous satisfaction of watching him eat it and call for a second piece. He made no other comment.

"How's it go, 'Gene?" she asked.

"Not so bad," he answered.

Before the end of the summer she made of herself a fairly competent cook.

She rose every day at dawn and sang and worked until dark. It was amazing how much she found to do in those four rooms. She worked as hard as ever she had worked in her life, but she did not know it. The hot summer days which in the restaurant used so to drag and leave her exhausted now sped by as in a wonderful dream.

'Gene was good to her, very good to her. He came home regularly after work, and on Saturday nights brought his unopened pay envelope without a word of protest. She paid a little each week on the furniture, kept the rent paid up, and yet lived very well indeed. She did not stint on the table, though she did a little in the matter of clothes. Every Sunday they took an excursion to the beach, where they both got into the water and lolled in the sand. She was very proud of 'Gene in his bathing suit. He looked like one of the lifeguards. She saw more

than one glance of admiration cast at his powerful legs and arms. She herself did not show to very good advantage in comparison, but she did n't mind that. Her pride in him was big enough to make her willing to sacrifice her own.

Now and then, especially when the heat grew suffocating in the city, she tried to question him a little about his life back home. There was a certain wistfulness in her questions. In the first place, she longed to know about his early days in order to share with him even those years. She could not get over the feeling that he still belonged back among the hills. She herself had seen little of the country, but that little had whetted her appetite for more. Happy as she was here, she could have been still happier with him out of the dust and confusion of the city.

"'Gene," she said one night, "are your folks still living?"

He looked up quickly.

"Yes," he answered bluntly.

"Your ma and pa and brother?"

"Yes; why?"

"Nothin'," she answered, seeing that she displeased him.

But after a little while she dropped her sewing again and asked:

## GOD JOINS TOGETHER

"It's queer you don't never hear from them

"I don't see nothin' queer about it," he answered.

"Don't you never expect to go back and see them?"

"No," he replied curtly. "Cut it out, will you. I want to read the paper."

"All right, 'Gene."

But when the summer passed and cold weather came, Bella noticed a change. The work became more disagreeable to him as the novelty wore off. Sometimes she found a dollar missing from his pocket. Sometimes she found a trace of drink in his breath. She said nothing the first time or two, though it kept her awake the latter part of the night. Finally, however, she plucked up her courage to warn him.

"'Gene," she said, "I'd cut out the booze altogether if I was you."

"What's that?" he demanded.

He was always aggressive at such times.

"I'm talkin' to you straight, 'Gene," she said.

"Can't a feller have a bit of something to keep from freezin'?" he challenged.

"Honest, I would n't."

She placed her hand upon his arm. He was himself free.

"It's all right for you, shut up in the house

talk. You don't know how damned cold it gets with the waves splashin' over you."

"Yes, I do, 'Gene," she answered tenderly. "It's bitter cold. If you'd let me come down with some hot coffee —"

He laughed.

"I'd look fine drinkin' hot coffee with the boys all in Mooney's."

"Coffee would be better fer you," she insisted.

"Forget it," he replied.

The very next Saturday night he came home in a worse condition than ever. She said nothing, but when after supper he was for starting out again she found her courage once more.

"Don't go."

"Ye'd think I was n't ten years old," he growled. She smiled.

"You was n't much older when I found you, 'Gene," she reminded him.

"Bah! I was a Rube then."

"I liked you when you was a Rube," she said.

He did not answer at once. Even he could not forget her kindness to him at that time.

"'Member how you came down to the Ferry that night?" she asked.

He nodded uneasily.

"'Member how we set on the bench in the park?"

"I ain't forgot," he answered. "I was only goin' out to pass the time of day with Sullivan."

She nestled closer to him.

"Ah, 'Gene, stay here with me to-night," she pleaded.

He threw down his hat and remained, but he was no very pleasant companion.

In spite of these worries it was about this time that a new and holy light warmed Bella's eyes. At first she hugged her secret close, for it left her quite breathless. It seemed for a short while too sacred a thing to confide even in her husband. It so occupied her thoughts that for the matter of two weeks she left 'Gene a free rein. He took advantage of it and one night turned up penniless and helpless.

With a great gulping choke she put him to bed and sat up all the rest of the night rocking slowly to and fro in the dark.

And her thoughts this time were neither of 'Gene nor of herself.

He awoke late the next morning in no very good humor. He wished to get out of the house. In his present fit of depression the sight of her annoyed him. He was disgusted with himself and with his whole life here. For the first time since he had left home he was homesick. He felt a longing for the clean sweet air of the hills, for the quiet of the old

farmhouse. He wanted a sight of Julie's clear eyes.

Bella without a word of reproach prepared his breakfast, but he ate little of it. After that he hung around the house all day strangely moody and silent. It was not until he went to work Monday morning that she referred to his debauch.

"'Gene," she said, "are you comin' straight home to-night?"

"You bet your life," he answered. "I've had enough of that."

She lifted her lips as she had in the office of the Justice of the Peace.

"Kiss me, 'Gene."

He kissed her and went out.

'Gene was not himself all that week. With the crisp fall air his fit of homesickness grew on him. It was as though he had awakened from a dream. He went back again in his thoughts to the day he had left Julie by the side of the road, and felt again the brush of her lips. He cursed himself for a fool and grew sulky. The only thing that held him at home was a certain awe he felt for the marriage relation itself. As far as Bella was concerned, he would have left her without hesitation. She was able to care for herself. She could go back to the restaurant with him out of the way. Probably she would forget him in six months.

It was Friday evening that he picked up the paper and saw an item that sent the color to his cheeks. It was to the effect that one Barney had been arrested for posing as a Justice of the Peace. The reporter discoursed at some length in a semi-humorous vein on what the probable outcome might be on those whom the "Justice" had married. Barney had done a flourishing business in that line, and it was roughly computed that at least a hundred couples were victims of his false claims.

From behind his paper 'Gene glanced at Bella. She was bowed over a bit of sewing. She had been very busy of late with her sewing, often working far into the night. The steady toil told on her. Her face was colorless and there were dark rings below her eyes. For a month now 'Gene had noticed that she was looking unusually plain.

He took a quick survey of the room. It was clean as a whistle, but there was no breathing space. At this moment he felt a sense of being crowded. He folded the paper and shoved it in his pocket. He must get out of doors. He rose and took down his hat. Bella glanced up anxiously.

"Oh, I 'm only goin' for a walk round the block," he assured her irritably.

"You won't be long?"

"No," he answered, starting for the door.



"'Gene,' she called.

"What is it?"

"I — I wish you 'd kiss me."

He returned, kissed her in a perfunctory way, and went out.

The night air was crisp, but in place of the earthy smell scented with the perfume of nuts which he knew now flavored the air at home, he was greeted with a salty foulness. To-night this nauseated him. He tried to get away from it, and at the end of a half-hour's walk found himself in the park. He sat down on a bench near an electric light and once again read the news item about Barney. So, as a matter of fact, Bella was not his wife at all. She had no claim whatever upon him. So far as the law went, he was as free as when he left home. Home!

The word gave birth to a day-dream. He saw himself getting off the train at St. Croix and walking over the road to the little red schoolhouse. He saw himself waiting outside until school was over. He saw Julie come out; saw her start at sight of him; saw himself stride towards her. He had not figured in a really dramatic episode for several months now. This appealed to every sense in him. It brought back to him the moment of parting as vividly as though it had been yesterday. It flushed his face and quickened the pace of his heart.

He rose and turned down the avenue towards Rooney's. He felt the need of a drink, but at the door he hesitated. He went through his pockets and found a dollar bill which he did n't know he had. This decided him. As he stepped forward, he heard a voice:

"Say, shipmate."

Turning, he found himself confronting a bronzed thick-set man with a parrot on his arm.

"What ye want?" 'Gene questioned with growing interest.

"I'm down an' out," answered the fellow. "Give me a half for the bird an' he's yours. He's worth a fiver if he's worth a cent."

"Where'd ye get him?" inquired 'Gene.

"In South Americy. I'm just ashore an' I'm stony broke."

"South America?" exclaimed 'Gene.

The word acted on him like magic.

"Th' same."

"I'll take him," 'Gene answered quickly.

The two passed through the doors together, and 'Gene secured change at the bar. Then he reached out eagerly for the bird. The latter sputtered a protest.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" he cawed. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Rio de Janeiro."

"Where 'n hell he picked up his cussin' is more 'n I know," the sailor apologized.

"That's all right," put in 'Gene. "Have a drink?"

"Will I? My throat's one long stretch of sandy desert."

"Ye say you're just back from South America?"

"Docked three days ago."

"Ye did n't happen to visit Rio de Janeiro, did ye?" questioned 'Gene.

It was the only cue the man needed, and for an hour 'Gene listened breathlessly to adventure after adventure in that and other ports. When he came out, he felt that he had been at sea himself.

'Gene left his parrot with a friend on the first floor and made his way uncertainly up the stairs to his own flat. As he expected, Bella was still up and still sewing. She greeted him with that same maddening, patient smile which for three weeks now had never left her face. He stumbled to bed.

The next day was Saturday. 'Gene came home sober and with his pay envelope intact. He felt a bit repentant and wished so far as possible to justify himself. That evening he was unusually decent to her. He helped her wash the supper dishes and swept the floor for her.

"'Gene," she faltered, "sometimes you're so good you make me ache."

His cheeks grew hot.

"Don't ye b'lieve it," he said quickly. "Ye'd be better off without me."

"Without you?" she faltered. "I wonder sometimes how I ever pulled it off long's I did without you."

"That's only the way ye feel now."

"More'n ever now," she answered.

For a second she seemed upon the point of saying something more, but she was unable to muster up the courage. With a soft little laugh to herself she turned away.

'Gene was up at daylight the next morning.

"You lie where you be," he urged his wife. "I'm kinder uneasy. Guess I'll take a walk."

"Where?" she asked in surprise.

"Just round. Oh, ye need n't be afeerd I'm goin' to tank up. See, here's the money."

With some ostentation he counted out his full week's salary before her and tossed it on the bed.

"If I was n't so sorter tired, I'd go with you, 'Gene," she said.

"Sleep as late as you can. Don't bother 'bout breakfast."

When he was dressed, he leaned over the bed and

kissed her. With sudden passion she reached up her thin arms and drew his sandy head to her breast.

"'Gene," she whispered, "I ain't never goneter scold you again, no matter what you does."

"I don't mind," he answered uneasily. "I tell ye I'm only a bother anyhow. Ye'd be better off if I was gone."

"Don't never say that again, 'Gene," she pleaded.

"It's God's truth," he answered. "Good-by."

He pulled himself free and stooping kissed her again. Then he left.

He stole down the stairs like a thief and called for his parrot. Then he hurried down one street after another until he found himself facing the suburbs and moving towards the east, towards St. Croix.

The only comfort he had was that he did n't have a red cent in his pocket. Everything that he had in common with Bella he had left behind. That was what he would do if he died, and to all intents and purposes he was dead to her. This was better and saved her the expense of a funeral. The thought cheered him into smiling and gave more spring to his long legs.

## CHAPTER XIX

### *'Gene Comes Home*

'GENE was very happy on the road from Boston to St. Croix. The weather remained fine most of the way, but when it was foul he had no difficulty in finding shelter. There was not a farmer's wife who did not put her best on the table when, with his blue eyes brightening in his bronzed face, he asked for food in return for work. Sometimes the farmer himself, to the disgust of his wife as a rule, insisted upon actual work in payment, and when this was the case 'Gene worked cheerfully enough. But more often than not he was received as a welcome passer-by, for when questioned he was ready with stories of the tropics which made the eyes of his listeners grow big in wonder. More than one farmer's lass went to bed hugging close the memory of this brave adventurer as her hero. At first he told his tale in a spirit of fun, but as he watched its effect and saw how readily it was believed he grew serious until he half believed the narrative himself. It was n't his fault that he had missed the reality by the margin of a night.

If under ordinary circumstances the truth of his yarns would have been questioned, his bronzed face, his youth, and, above all, the parrot left not a shadow of doubt. He had grown fond of this bird. The pretty red and green creature perched upon his shoulder during his long daily walks had furnished him both companionship and entertainment. The bird was a constant surprise and taught him many new nautical terms of which he made good use. In his turn 'Gene taught him to say "Julie," and by careful training schooled him to avoid combining the name with some of his pet oaths. There was nothing sentimental in the bird's earlier wild expression of "Damn. Damn. Julie. Shiver me timbers — damn Julie."

In true sailor fashion 'Gene thought little of that other girl he left behind him. He had absolute confidence in Bella's ability to get along by herself and he had been as generous as it was possible for him to be in leaving her all of his last week's salary. The furnishings of the flat would bring enough to clear the rent, and so he did not see why she was not as well off as before she met him. He liked to feel that she would miss him for a little while and probably would cry a little, but when all was over she would settle back into her old rut. Possibly some day he might return to Boston and look her up. He

had no definite plan in mind. He was too content, too full of life, to do any scheming.

In this way he reached St. Croix on the thirteenth day of his departure from Boston. The sky was blue and the air crisp when after a night in the woods he arose, washed his face in a spring, and going on to the village secured a breakfast from a friend. He next visited the village store, where he was readily given credit for a new blue suit, a blue flannel shirt and a loose black tie. At the barber shop he secured a hair cut and shave. When in the middle of the forenoon he finally started for the home of Julie, he looked like a hardy and prosperous seaman.

He discovered himself a good deal of a hero, and passed through the town stopped by dozens who wished to hear further of his adventures. By the time he neared the Moulton house he was very well content with himself.

Then, at a turn in the road, he met Flint. The latter had drunk just enough to be comfortably hospitable. At heart he too was a vagabond and he greeted 'Gene like an old friend.

"Glad to see you home again, 'Gene," he said, extending a long thin hand. "Where ye been?"

"Just off on a little cruise," answered 'Gene nonchalantly.



Flint's faded eyes brightened. He had pleasant, gentle features, and in spite of gray hair at his temples looked more like a boy than a man.

"To Jamaicy? Don't tell me ye've ben to Jamaicy."

In the single year which embraced the sum total of his own adventures Flint had visited that port. All his pet stories centered about that corner. He cherished it as his own.

"No," answered 'Gene. "Just to South Americcy. To Rio mostly."

"Ye don't tell," answered Flint with a sigh of relief.

He looked cautiously about. He beckoned 'Gene mysteriously into the bushes by the side of the road. He extended his hand again.

"It's good to meet a shipmate," he said. "Do ye ever taste anything?"

"Don't care if I do," answered 'Gene with a touch of bravado.

Flint produced a bottle from his pocket and offered it. 'Gene drew the cork and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of what tasted like crude petroleum. But it went to his head instantly. It was all that was needed to clinch his self-delusion. He handed back the bottle with a hypocritical smack of his lips.

"Good stuff," he averred.

Flint held the bottle to his own mouth and nearly emptied it.

"I reckon ye seen a thing or two? Eh?" Flint coaxed him.

"More 'n you 'd find in this town in a hundred year," answered 'Gene.

He sat down and began his yarns all over again. But he elaborated them now as never before, and as he talked on he seemed to see Julie listening to him in wide-eyed wonder. The vision soon grew so entrancing that he felt eager to be off to her. He concluded briefly.

"So I shipped back to Boston and here I am."

He rose.

"Any of that stuff left?"

Flint willingly handed over the bottle, and 'Gene took another long drink.

"I 'll return the favor some day," 'Gene assured him, as he moved off. "Sorry I can't stay longer, but I 've got some important business, very important business."

"Good luck, mate," muttered Flint, as he dreamily waved good-by.

'Gene walked the remainder of the distance with his mind inflamed with desire of Julie. No dream

that his heated brain conjured up now seemed too wild to come true. The parrot caught the contagion and chattered like a magpie.

So he came to the clean white house sitting quietly back from the road.

## CHAPTER XX

### *A Promise Redeemed*

ON Friday afternoon Nat had begged Julie not to go home until the next day.

"The auction's to-morrow," he explained.

"What auction?" she asked, as though this were news to her.

"At the Lovell place. I told ye we could pick up a lot of nice things for the house."

"What house?" she inquired.

"Your house," he answered.

Her cheeks flamed scarlet as she met his eyes.

"Nat," she protested, "you have no right to say such a thing as that."

"I'm only tellin' ye the truth," he replied.

"It is n't the truth. It's absurd for you to say so. Why — why, it's ridiculous."

"I told ye from the beginning that I built the house for you. From sill to roof I built it for you, Julie."

"But you can't do a thing like that. I told you from the beginning that you must n't."

"But I *did*," he explained simply.

"But you should n't."

"But I *did*."

"Nat," she exploded petulantly, "I can't seem to make you understand anything. You always go ahead and do as you please."

"Will you come to the auction?" he asked, returning to his first point.

"No," she refused flatly, "I'm going home to-night."

Her refusal hurt him. She saw that. But he was always forcing her to hurt him. And in doing that he was always forcing her to hurt herself, for in spite of her indisputable right to her position it cut her to the quick to see that look of dumb resignation creep into his eyes.

"If you would only be reasonable, Nat," she added.

"What do ye mean by reasonable?" he asked.

"Why — why, doing as I tell you," she answered.

"I do all I can that ye ask me," he said.

She smiled.

"The trouble is that you do more," she protested.

"And that is n't half enough," he answered quickly. "Ye don't know all that I want to do and can't. Ye don't know —"

But she crowded her two hands over her ears and began to shake her head.

"I won't listen," she cried. "I — I'm going home."

So that night he drove her to St. Croix and left her. But before he turned his horse she looked up at him half fearing, half pleading.

"You must n't go over there to-morrow and spend all your money."

"I'll spend what I have," he answered.

"Then you won't mind me?" she pleaded, her voice grown tender.

"No," he answered, "I can't mind ye about some things."

"Then," she trembled, "don't ever blame me, Nat. You'll promise that?"

"Blame ye for what?"

"For anything," she insisted eagerly.

"I could n't if I tried," he answered.

She watched from the doorstep until the dark swallowed him up, and then stood there for a moment with her heart beating faster than usual. She liked him best when he was arbitrary and domineering. She liked him best when he was as he had been on the mountain top and took matters into his own hands, leaving her the satisfaction of feeling quite powerless. There were moments when, if he had turned and with tightened lips commanded her to come, she would have come. If to-night, for in-

when he last returned to put her down at her home and not taken her straight to the parsonage she felt as though she must perhaps have gone with him. The thought left her quite dizzy. And from there they would have driven back to the house in the hill. In spite of all she said she could not shake herself free from the feeling that the house really was here. She knew how he must have valued it. She knew that he would not have done it for himself alone. Though she had not yet been inside the house, she knew every nook and cranny in every room. And to-morrow he would bring back furnishings for them and make the house more a living thing than ever.

All that night she was restless. The thought that Nat was going right ahead frightened her. She felt like one in the clutch of a maelstrom. In spite of all she said, she was powerless to check him. In spite of all her sense of loyalty she found herself less and less inclined to check him. That was the sober truth. Her arguments against him were becoming pitifully weak. And the man who should have helped her be strong had never written her since he left. She had been driven to one excuse after another to explain this, but these too were now becoming pitifully weak. In the dark she called out

“ 'Gene — 'Gene, please come back quick.”

The morning found her thoughts more sober, but the problem no less pressing. After breakfast she went back to her room resolved to come to some decision. In the first place, as a matter of justice, she returned to 'Gene. She reviewed every episode of the winter before and brought to life again every one of her moods of those days. At first 'Gene had seemed to her only a boy and she had laughed at his youthfulness. She had allowed him to walk home with her every night and finally allowed him to call in the evening. Still, month after month, he remained only an interesting youngster. A touch of the daredevil in him had appealed to her — a touch of the adventurer. He talked wildly and loosely of his proposed adventures in foreign lands until all of a sudden he had told her that he was really going. With her cheeks scarlet she recalled the night he had climbed to her window. She felt again the hot pressure of his hand, his demand that she come out and talk with him. Then — the rest! Her hot cheeks burned with the memory of that; her lips became dry. She had lost her head that evening, but even now she felt the grasp of his arms and the brush of his lips. Then in the cool of the next morning it had all been repeated, and she had watched him trudge off over the hill. Night



after night, since then, she had dreamed of him and waited for word of him. Following this, she had pictured his adventures night after night. She smiled now at his promise of a tiger skin for her. And the parrot—twenty parrots! That was only the brave promise of a lad, but nevertheless it had pleased her then and it pleased her now. Nat would never have made any such promise. He would have trudged off with his lips tight closed over his thoughts. When in port, instead of going off after tigers or parrots, Nat probably would have found a snug boarding-house and written letters until the ship sailed. She smiled again. Dear, good, kind, sober Nat! If Nat only had a touch more of 'Gene in him or if 'Gene only had a touch more of Nat in him, there would be no such problem as now confronted her. But what might be did n't alter what was. She forced herself back to the facts.

One of the facts was that she could n't remain at Hio after the fall term with things as they were. She would n't trust herself to do that. Besides, with Nat in the woods it would be a very stupid place. She wondered what he would do with the house when he was away. If he should lock the front door and board up the windows, she would die of loneliness. He must promise not to do that. She would

ask him to leave the curtains up, just as though some one were living there. Even then it would look deserted without sight of him at night-fall working about the place. She had watched him up there every evening after supper, either tidying up the grounds or busy about some bit of carpentering inside the house itself. She almost died of curiosity every time she heard his hammer, and once went so far as to peek in a window at him. She had heard him whistling softly to himself. It was one of the chansons her mother had taught her. And now, just about this time, he was at the Lovell place buying chairs and tables and what not, while she was here having no part in it. A bit resentfully she concluded that he ought to have made her go with him. He had no right to choose all by himself. There was a Grandfather's clock there which she wanted very much. It would go very well opposite the fireplace. It had a quaint face, with a parrot painted —

Once again she was drawn up sharply. She blushed at her presumption. The next second she blamed Nat for her lapse. He was always leading her on. Then, below her window she heard a strange, chattering caw. She sprang back into the middle of the room, as she had the night that 'Gene climbed to her casement. Her breath stopped short. She listened with cheeks as white as marble.

Once again the sound was repeated, and this time she made out of the unintelligible gibberish accompanying it, the single word "Rio de Janeiro." With her knees weak she crept to the window and looked out. She saw by the front door the tall form of a young man. She saw his bronzed face. She saw the parrot on his arm. She could n't move her lips. She sank into a chair and waited. The sound of the knocker on the front door brought her to her feet and sent her stumbling down the stairs. But before she opened the door she paused for breath — dizzy, confused, frightened. She heard the knocker raised a second time, and fearing this would bring her mother to the door, suddenly swung it open. She found herself staring into 'Gene's smiling blue eyes. She heard him breathe her name. The sound of it instantly took her back six months, so that it seemed but yesterday that he had left.

"'Gene," she answered. "It's you!"

"Yes," he answered. "And here's your parrot."

He held the bird out to her, perched on the forefinger of his hand. She drew back from the strange creature, which ruffled up its feathers and opening its beak wide squawked a warning at her.

"'Gene!" she panted.

"Can't ye come down the road a little way? I want to talk to ye afore I see the folks."

"I — I don't know," she faltered. "I — I can't think."

He reached for her hand.

"Come," he insisted.

She obeyed him, and by his side crossed the yard. They reached the road unseen, and he took her arm. He led her around a bend out of sight of the house. There he held her at arm's length a moment in delirious admiration. Not in all his travels had he seen so fresh and fair a woman. In her person she embodied all, that in sudden revulsion against the sordid staleness of his recent life, he craved. Every curve of her young form expressed grace and charm. But, above all, she was dew-fresh, like a flower in the early morning.

She lowered her eyes in confusion at his hot gaze. He seized her by the shoulders and drew her gasping for breath into his arms.

"Julie," he whispered, "I did n't know I loved ye so much. I can't get my breath. I can't wait another day — another hour for ye. You're mine now — now."

"'Gene," she choked.

"Aye — call my name over and over again. I have n't heard it since I left ye. It's like a new

name, and the sound of it from you makes me feel like a new man. I feel 's though I'd been gone twenty years — I ache so for you."

He kissed her hair, kissed her at the temples, and she in a daze suffered it. After all, this was 'Gene — her 'Gene. They had plighted their troth before he left, and though now he seemed strange he was still the same 'Gene.

"Look up at me and tell me ye still love me," he insisted.

She raised her eyes. He was very handsome and hardy. She saw him in a mist, but he was surely her 'Gene.

"Tell me, tell me," he whispered.

"I — I think I do," she faltered.

"No. I'll have none of that. Tell me out and out. Tell me, 'Gene, I love you.'"

"'Gene, I love you," she repeated.

"Is it six months since I heard that?"

"It seems very long," she answered. "You never wrote to me."

"I did n't," he confessed. "It seems though I never had time. I've been through a lot since I saw you."

"And now you're back safe and sound," she said in awe.

"And lovin' you more than ever."

The parrot, who had hopped to the ground and perched upon a rock, began to chatter.

"Rio. Rio. Rio de Janeiro."

"You went to Rio?" she asked in a trembling whisper.

"To Rio and a hundred other places," he answered. "I've more to tell ye than would take a year."

The whiskey was still inflaming his brain. He hardly knew what he said, what he did. He was obsessed by the one idea to make her his forever. He would n't risk leaving her alone another day.

"Julie," he burst out, "before I see any one else, before I go home, I want to make you mine for good."

"What do you mean?" she stammered, sensing his meaning.

"I want ye to go down to the Reverend Gideon now — this minute. I want him to marry us within an hour."

"Within an hour?" she gasped.

"Sooner, if we can find him. What's the use of waiting?" he ran on, reading the fear in her eyes; "we don't want any wedding. We've waited long enough."

"'Gene — why, I could n't think of that. I —"

"Yes, you can, you must. Then we'll come home and I'll have time to talk to you."

"But father — mother —"

"What difference does it make whether they know before or after? I tell you I can't wait. And, for all I know, I might have to leave again in a week."

She clung to his arm.

"No, no, 'Gene, you would n't go again, you would n't leave me again."

"I can't tell. But if I was safe married to you — Ah, let's not talk about it. Let's go. Let's hurry."

He took her arm. For a step or two she went reluctantly, and then, catching the contagion of his passion, she put her arm within his. She did not know what she was about. She simply followed. In this fashion they proceeded to the town clerk and secured a license and then to the parsonage. In this daze she found herself sitting in the parlor. She heard 'Gene talking in a low voice to the minister, and the next thing she was conscious of was Mrs. Gideon's presence. The latter was speaking to her.

"What's this, child? You want to be married this way?"

'Gene swung his eyes towards her.

"Yes," she nodded.

"Do your parents know about it?"

"Not yet. But — but we're going right back to them."

'Gene stepped forward.

"We don't want to bother them with a wedding. And I may have to leave any time."

The good lady shook her head, but there seemed nothing to do except carry out their wishes. In a few moments the tall lank form of the Rev. Elisha Gideon was standing before them, prayer-book in hand. In a deep, impressive voice he read the service. Julie answered his questions with trembling lips. It all sounded very solemn to her, and she was startled almost into crying when the minister lifted his head and glaring about the room demanded that "If any man knew why these two should not be joined together, let him now speak or forever after hold his peace." 'Gene too started at this. He glanced over his shoulder towards the door. But this crisis was safely passed, and he slipped upon her finger the gold band which had been his grandmother's and which he had always worn. The ceremony was over in a marvelously short time.

'Gene took her arm and led her out of the house and back down the road to the bend. There they found the parrot hopping wildly about and swear-



ing terribly. In their excitement they had forgotten him.

"Damn. Damn. Damn," he croaked, with such venomous anger that the words sounded ominous. With a shiver Julie turned to 'Gene.

"Oh," she sobbed, "what have you made me do, 'Gene?"

He kissed her and patted her gently.

"There, there!" He tried to quiet her. "That ain't a pretty way for a bride to act."

"I — I can't help it."

The parrot pecked at her ankles. She clung to her husband.

"Take him away. He frightens me," she cried.

'Gene turned towards the bird, and lifting his heavy boot kicked him into the bushes. The parrot lay there where he fell, a helpless bunch of green and yellow feathers. In horror Julie ran a few steps towards the house. She covered her eyes with her hands.

"That's what I'll do to any one who bothers my Julie," he growled. He followed to her side.

"Don't touch me. Don't touch me for a minute," she choked, thrusting out her hand.

"Look here, Julie," he broke in. "This ain't any way to act. The trouble is you're scared. Now you go into the house. I'll go on to the village,

and then in an hour I'll come back. You'll feel all right by then."

"Yes," she nodded. "Go now."

But he seized her in his arms and kissed her again and again before he left. From the bushes came a feeble dying croak.

"Julie. Ju —"

The feathers fluttered a second and then settled down limply.

## CHAPTER XXI

### *A Toast to the Bride*

**W**ITH his head spinning with pain from the drink and the excitement, Gene made his way back to St. Croix. His lips were parched, and with the reaction his spirits sank to abysmal depths. He was haunted with the dying croak of the parrot, haunted by that last look in Julie's eyes, haunted by the sepulchral demand of the parson, "If any man know reason why these two should not be joined together, let him now speak or forever after hold his peace." The words conjured up the white tense face of Bella, as though it were flashed before his eyes on a screen.

There on the lonely road he answered that look out loud:

"We were n't married, I tell ye. It was all a mistake. Barney ware n't any Justice at all."

But still the gray eyes stared at him as they used to stare up from the sewing when he came home un-  
tendy on his feet. Only now it was worse, a hundred times worse. Had Bella been within reach of

him at that moment, he would have been sorely tempted to strike her. She had no right to bother him this way. He had been fair to her. He had paid all the bills while they lived together and had taken her to the beach and places. He had left her all he had when he went. Lots of men would n't have done this much. He had met a dozen men who had done worse by their wives without being blamed for it.

The trouble with him was that he needed a drink. If he had just one drink, it would straighten him out. He always felt like this when he needed a drink. Coming to the spot where he had left Flint, he pushed through the bushes. The old man lay there still asleep, with a gentle smile around his weak mouth. 'Gene roused him.

"Flint," he called.

The old man rose to his elbow. He rubbed his eyes.

"What's matter?" he inquired drowsily.

'Gene stooped and shook him by the shoulder.

"See here, Flint," he called. "I've got to have a drink. I'm dying for a drink. Got anything left?"

Flint shook his head.

"Not a drop," he answered.

"But ye know where ye can get some?"

Flint looked thoughtful.

"When I was down in Jamaica, I had all the rum I could drink — all I could drink."

"But ye can get some now. I know ye can. See here — ye get a quart and to-morrow I'll pay ye anything ye ask for it."

Flint shook his head.

"If I was down in Jamaica now — I was dreamin' 'bout that. What did you wake me up for?"

"Look-a-here," 'Gene ran on in desperation. "Ye'll do that for a shipmate, won't ye? Ye know what 't is to go broke?"

"I don't know nothin' else," answered Flint. "It's hell, ain't it?"

"I can get the money to-morrow from Nat," 'Gene whined on. "Come, get up. Just a quart — and ye can have half of it."

"Ye'll pay to-morrer?"

"Honest."

Flint made his feet. He rubbed his heavy eyes.

"All right," he agreed.

He paused suspiciously.

"I've gotter friend thet'll give it to me, but he don't sell none."

"I know, I know," answered 'Gene eagerly.

He took Flint's arm and hurried him into the road. The latter protested and finally stopped short.

"I ain't goneter run," he declared.

"That's right," agreed 'Gene. "No hurry. But for Gawd's sake *crawl* anyhow."

Flint led him into the village and to a small squalid house in the rear of the post-office. He was greeted at the door by a loose-jointed, loose-featured young man whom 'Gene recognized as Al Foley. 'Gene extended his hand in a cordial greeting.

"Hello, Al!" he said. "I'm darned glad to see ye again."

Al looked suspicious. It was the first time 'Gene had ever more than nodded in his direction.

Flint stepped to the front. The formalities necessary to secure a drink in St. Croix were as nicely established as in the diplomatic service.

"'Gene here," he said, "was taken sudden sick. I did n't know but what ye might have a little Jamaicy ginger or suthin'."

Foley shook his head.

"I ain't gut nothin'," he answered.

"I see," nodded Flint. "Maybe now a cup of hot water would help."

"Hot water be damned!" snorted 'Gene.

Flint nudged him in the ribs.

"With a little sugar and maybe suthin' hot," smiled Flint.

"Perhaps I can give ye hot water if that 's all ye want," smiled Foley.

Flint led the way in, with Gene crowding close at his heels. The first point was won in getting inside the house. As they entered the sitting-room, a half-dozen children scampered out and a door banged sharply behind them. Flint sat down in a wicker chair and motioned Gene to follow his example. Foley stood by the cold air-tight stove and waited.

"How 's your garden comin'?" inquired Flint.

"Fair to middlin'," answered Foley.

"If ye had the kind of weather they have where 'Gene 's been now —"

"Whar 's thet?" inquired Foley.

"South Americy," answered Flint. "An' he says as how rum 's free as water down thar."

He paused.

"He 's jus' back," continued Flint, sinking his voice to a mysterious whisper. "An' he 's powerful thirsty. If ye hed a quart of suthin' —"

Foley bristled up.

"Course I knows ye only has it in the house in case of sickness," Flint added quickly. "The p'int is, 'Gene here has gut used to it, so he gits p'ison-

sick without it. Might be ye'd save his life with just a quart."

"I keeps a little on hand for the kids," Foley admitted.

"I tell ye," said Flint, "if ye'd jus' loan him a quart — say till to-morrer."

Foley glanced towards the door. Then suddenly swooping down upon the stove, he lifted the cover and drew out a quart bottle.

"I don't sell none," he said.

"Course ye don't," agreed Flint. "An' I would n't ask ye fer it 'cept in case of sickness. Maybe now ye'd join us in a swaller?"

Foley produced three glasses. 'Gene filled his to the brim. With a lift and a nod he raised the glass to his lips and drained it to the bottom. The stuff swept away the cobwebs in his brain instantly. In another minute it had banished the tense face; in another even the croak of the dying parrot. He filled a second glass, while the two men stared at him in amazement.

"Ye surely shows yer trainin'," commented Flint.

"I was thirsty — clear to my boot-heels," answered 'Gene. "Lord, but that's good."

Within five minutes he was himself again; in another five, more than himself. He began to talk



with his old-time bravado and gay laughter. Flint egged him on, and he spun wilder yarns than ever about his adventures at sea. The two men listened in fascinated wonder. He told of a tiger hunt in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro which led him straight through the city. He brought his big fist down on the table to emphasize his points. He told of a fight with knives on the high seas; he told of spending a hundred dollars in a night when in port.

Flint drank in every word.

"Lord, man," he finally exclaimed, "I don't see whatever brought ye back here."

This was a suggestive point. What had brought him back here? Why, he had come back to get married. He *was* married. He had married the finest girl in the world. Instantly he grew sentimental. He lowered his voice.

"Gents," he said, rising to his feet with his tumbler full again, "I'm a-goin' to tell ye a secret. What for did I come back here, ye ask? Whatever brings a seafarin' man back to port? What is it that takes a man across a thousand miles of sea?"

It was long since he had orated. He grew fascinated by the sound of his own voice.

"What is it, I says, that takes a man into the

jungles in the first place? An' I answers, it's woman—lovely woman. Black eyes and pink cheeks and soft curves—they takes ye off to get tiger skins an' they brings ye back again. They takes ye off to Rio an' they brings ye back to St. Croix. Gents, I'm goneter ask ye to drink to the best of them. I'm goin' to ask ye to drink to the finest little girl in the world. I'm goneter ask ye to drink to Julie Page that was Julie Moulton."

He lifted his glass high. The other men followed. He drained his liquor to the last drop, and then, after a fashion he had seen a man once do in Rooney's, he dashed his tumbler to the floor. The result very nearly precipitated a fight. Foley was willing to drink to a bride, but he objected to having his crockery broken. 'Gene snapped his fingers in the man's face.

"I'll pay ye for it or I'll fight ye for it," he offered.

Flint threw himself between the two men.

"Come," he said, "let's get out. I'm sleepy. Soon's I've had a nap I'm goneter git converted."

"Perfectly willin' to fight," 'Gene repeated magnanimously. It would have taken ten Foleys to have held him at that moment.

"Get out, both o' ye!" growled Foley.

'Gene hesitated.

"One more drink to the bride," he decided.

Foley grabbed for the bottle and hurled it to the floor.

"Ye don't git no more here," he scowled.

Flint seized 'Gene's arm and dragged him out. He piloted him safely through the village, and then suggested that he had better lie down and have a nap with him.

"Nothin' more delicious," drawled Flint.

"Not for me," answered 'Gene. "I'm a-goin' to a blushin' bride. I'm a-goin' home."

"All righ'," answered Flint. "Bye 'n' by ye 'll learn better. Bye 'n' by blushin' bride 'll learn ye better."

He sank into the leaves, nodding wisely to himself.

With his head held high, 'Gene went on towards the home of Silas Moulton. He was half delirious with triumphant joy. His imagination overleaped all bounds as his extravagant brain sprang from one notion to another. He was his own hero and his own audience, with, however, Julie always smiling at him from the background. He had now no hesitation in facing the Moultons. He neither feared nor cared what their attitude might be. Puffed up with his own egotism, he challenged the whole world to criticize his actions. He strutted to the front

door and without stopping to knock walked in. The door to the sitting-room was open, and he found himself confronting a group of three. Mrs. Moulton was sitting rigid in a chair, with Julie at her feet. Silas stood by his wife, with his face white and his head half bowed.

'Gene strode into the middle of the room and greeted them with a broad smile.

"Julie has told ye?" he inquired.

The girl, at sound of his voice, sprang to her feet, her face as white as her mother's. The latter gave one glance at 'Gene's bloodshot eyes and shut out the sight with her hands.

"'Gene," cried Julie, "what's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

Silas Moulton swept her aside. He studied the younger man a moment, as though to make sure of what he suspected; then with a look of sickened disgust he turned to his daughter.

"Sick?" he choked. "He's drunk — drunk as a dog."

'Gene clenched his fists, but Julie was instantly by his side.

"No," she gasped. "That is n't possible. That is n't —"

Then she turned away. With bloodless cheeks she shrank back — back into her father's arms.

"If a man takes a single drink, they call him drunk round here," snarled 'Gene.

Silas stepped forward.

"Get out of my house," he commanded.

"Easy. Easy there," warned 'Gene. "If I go I take my wife with me."

"Your wife?" stormed Silas. "D'ye think a ring and a prayer-book makes her your wife?"

"I reckon before the law it does," answered 'Gene.

"What do I care for the law?" stormed Silas. "Why, before I'd see her your wife I'd see her dead. So help me God, I'd see her dead."

Mrs. Moulton staggered to her feet and tottered to her husband's side.

"Silas," she said quietly.

"I mean it," he answered savagely. "Why —"

"Hush, father," broke in Julie. "It is n't all his fault. It's partly mine, too. I —"

"Is it your fault, too, that he comes back here beastly drunk?"

"Perhaps," answered Julie. "I ought n't to have sent him away."

"Who's drunk?" broke in 'Gene. "I've had a drink or two — yes. But I'm no more drunk than you are, and I tell ye the law's the law. I mar-

ried the girl an hour ago and she's my wife. Ask her if she ain't. Ask Julie."

Julie raised her head.

"Yes, 'Gene," she answered, "I'm your wife."

"There ye are," he exclaimed triumphantly. "There 't is from her own lips. Now I'll go if ye want me to, but she goes with me. I was plannin' a little visit with ye, but say the word and we go. I reckon my folks will take us in till I have a chance to look around."

"No," trembled the girl, "we must n't go from here. If you'll be patient, Dad, I'd rather stay with you a little."

"Stay? Of course ye'll stay. D'ye think I'd let ye cross the door by that man's side?"

"You'll stay, p'tite," put in her mother. "It would kill us both if you went now."

"I'm willin'," 'Gene put in good-naturedly. "But I tell ye now I won't stand for much more of that free talk."

He swaggered to a chair and sat down. Silas turned on his heel and tottered out.

"You go too, mother," pleaded Julie in a whisper. "Let me talk with him a moment."

But the mother clung frantically to her daughter's arm.

"I can't, I can't," she trembled.

"Just for a minute," insisted Julie.

She led her mother to the door and closed it. Then she came half-way back to 'Gene. The latter rose to meet her.

"Sit down, 'Gene," she said.

He obeyed a new quality in her voice.

She paused a moment to catch her breath and then asked, as though with some faint hope that he might deny it:

"'Gene — you have been drinking?"

"I told ye I had a drink or two," he answered.

Her lips did not quiver, but the pain shot through her eyes.

"I — I did n't know you were that way," she said.

"Seems to me you're makin' a lot of rumpus about nothin'," he answered.

"It would n't be so bad," she said, as though to herself, "it would n't be so bad if you had n't done it to-day. You — you had been drinking before you met me first?"

He shifted uneasily. But before her steady eyes he told the truth.

"Yes," he answered.

She clutched at the back of a chair, with her eyes turned away from him.

"And we 're married now, really married?" she asked.

"What d'ye mean? Of course we are. Was n't you present?"

"I don't know," she trembled. "I suppose I was, but I can't remember very well."

"Well, you was," he informed her.

"So you 're my husband, 'Gene."

"I reckon."

"But it's my fault too," she put in, still talking as though to herself. "I must n't forget that."

He sprang to his feet.

"You 're talking as though ye was crazy, Julie. Why —"

He started towards her, but she waved him back.

"No, 'Gene — sit down."

Once again he obeyed. He was getting drowsy.

"'Gene," she said, "I am very tired. Won't you go upstairs and lie down? You — you can have my room."

"Now you 're talkin' sense," he answered. "Where is it?"

"I'll show you, 'Gene," she answered.

She led the way up the stairs, and he followed, groping for the wall. She opened the door for him and stood back.



"But you —" he began.

She shrank away from him as from something unclean.

"The room is yours," she said. "I will wait downstairs for you."

## CHAPTER XXII

### *'Gene Awakes*

GENE slept through the remainder of that day, through the night and far into the next morning. When he finally awoke in the dainty white-curtained room, it took him some time to piece together his scattered thoughts. He had to go way back to the morning when in the dawn he had felt the warm arms of Bella about his neck and had looked down into the gray eyes which burned from the shadowy face. From this point his brain leaped to the scene of yesterday afternoon, and he shrank back beneath the coverlet. His cheeks burned with shame, and he felt here like an intruder in some holy shrine. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep again in an effort to escape the present. This was impossible, and so he lay there weak and sick at heart and tried to plan some way of escape. If he could get out of the house unseen, he might make his way back to Boston and still retrieve himself with Bella. She would forgive him and he could explain his absence on the ground of homesickness and a trip back

to his mother. He plucked up courage at this, and getting out of bed began to dress. He was honestly *excuse* for the whole adventure. Had it been possible, he would have undone it all and returned to his job on the Ferry and settled down for the winter. It was Flint who was to blame — Flint who had offered him a drink in the first place. He persuaded himself that from the beginning all he had intended to do was to visit his folks and Julie and then return.

He finished dressing, but drew back startled at the sight of his face in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and heavy. He sickened at his own appearance. He brushed his hair until it shone like gold, whisked his clothes until they were speckless, and still he looked like a tramp. From below he caught the aroma of hot coffee. If he only had a cup of that, it might straighten him out, but his forehead became moist with perspiration at thought of seeing Julie again. He had no defense left. He must take the mauling of those eyes, listen in silence to whatever she might say, and still realize the deeper horror of what he had done. He could n't endure it. He must get out — get away.

He swung open the door and tiptoed down the stairs, feeling like a thief. The house was grue-

somely quiet. It was as though some one were lying dead in one of the rooms. He paused at sound of his own creaking, and felt an impulse to shout and make a wild bolt for the door. Half-way he sat down and rubbed his big hand over his dry forehead in an agony of self-reproach. When he had partly recovered himself, he went on again. He reached the foot of the stairs and was stealing past the sitting-room door when he heard a voice. He saw Julie rise from a chair and come to meet him. She might have been the dead thing he had feared as far as her appearance went. Her dark-rimmed eyes stared dully out of a face as colorless as anything in shrouds. She was dressed in pure white, which made the effect even worse.

"Good-morning, 'Gene," she said.

Even her voice was dead.

He passed his hand over his eyes.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"It's almost eleven o'clock," she answered. "I have been waiting breakfast for you."

"Waiting? For me?" he answered.

"Yes, 'Gene."

He turned away from her.

"I don't want any breakfast. I don't want anything. I wish to God I was dead."

She had come to the door.

"But you aren't dead!" she answered.

It sounded like the hopeless statement of one who had prayed for death.

"Come," she said, "your coffee is ready."

She led him into the dining-room and showed him his place. She went out into the kitchen, and soon returned with the coffee, some hot biscuits, and his eggs. She broke the eggs for him and then took her seat opposite him and poured his coffee. He did n't dare to look at her while she was doing these things, but kept his head bowed and his eyes on his plate. When she handed him his cup, he managed to say:

"You're mighty good, Julie."

She did not answer, but he could feel her eyes upon him. Once during the meal he heard the quick intake of her breath.

"Julie," he said, "I've half a mind to clear out and leave ye."

"What good would that do?" she asked.

"Then I would n't bother ye."

"If you ran off, you would bother me more than ever," she replied.

He glanced up.

"Then ye want me to stay—spite of everything?"

"You must stay—in spite of everything."

"I could go back to sea."

"And leave me here?"

"Ye would n't want to go with me, would ye?"

"No," she answered, "but I would have to go."

"Ye would? Ye mean ye *would* go?"

"'Gene," she said, "do you understand that yesterday I married you?"

"Yes," he groaned. "But —"

"That I took oath to cling to you for better and for worse?" she interrupted. "We can't change that, can we?"

"I s'pose not," he answered.

"Then," she said, "if you go I must go with you. But I don't want you to go."

"It won't be very pleasant here, I reckon," he growled.

"It is n't going to be very pleasant anywhere, 'Gene. But if you stay here, it seems to me you can make it better. It seems to me you ought to make it better."

"How?" he asked.

She studied him a moment and then answered:

"You'll have to work that out for yourself."

"If ye could forgive me and forget yesterday —" he began.

"If you could *make* me forgive you and forget yesterday!" she cried.

"I will, Julie," he answered eagerly. "I will if ye'll give me a chance."

A bit of color returned to her cheeks.

"You'll even have to make your own chances," she answered.

"But ye'll let me try!" he asked.

"If only you would try!"

He made his feet and hurried to her side, but she warned him off.

"No," she said. "You mustn't touch me — you mustn't touch me again for a long while."

He resented the rebuff.

"There, ye see. Ye won't give a man a show."

"I — I can't let you touch me, 'Gene," she insisted, half in apology.

"And then ye say you're my wife."

She shuddered at this.

"And you're my husband," she nodded. "But I can't let you touch me."

Her aloofness inflamed him. He tried to seize her as he used to do, but she fought free of him. With a chair between them she faced him indignantly.

"Listen," she said. "You mustn't ever try to do that again. You don't know how near I am to hating you."

"Then what was ye talkin' about a minute ago?"

"I meant every word I said. I mean that I am willing to let you make me feel different. But that's all I can do. Last night I thought it out; you will have my room, and I will have the spare room next to mother's. We will live here and you will try to do better. And no one must know; not a soul must know, 'Gene. I don't want any one to think ill of you, because that would make it all the harder for you. So, if you will do that and try, then some day God will let us forget."

"In a year or two?" he frowned.

"I don't know," she answered wearily. "It seems now as though it would take longer."

He grew stubborn. Her cold indifferent attitude irritated him. And yet it held him too. This was a new Julie, but none the less a beautiful Julie. He had never so desired her as at this moment.

"I don't have to wait for you. You're mine now. You're my wife."

With a quick step towards her he seized her arm.

"I love you and you're mine," he cried passionately.

"'Gene!" she warned.

But he forced her nearer to him and kissed her hair. She shivered the length of her delicate young body. She fought him like a tigress, while he laughed at her struggles. But in the end she



squirmed free and running towards the kitchen door turned and faced him with horror.

"Now," she choked, "now you've spoiled it all."

"You're my wife," he answered stubbornly.

The words seemed to break even her present passion. Her head fell and she began to sob. 'Gene was quickly sympathetic, and the sight moved him more to shame than her words had done.

"I could n't help it," he muttered. "Don't cry."

"You've spoiled everything," she choked.

She groped for the door and stumbled out, leaving him staring in baffled shame and anger.

WITH still five miles of the fifteen to walk before he reached the home of Julie, Nat met Al Foley, who was exercising his mare Belle Marie. Nat never saw these two together, the fine blooded horse clean and delicate as a woman in all her parts and the weak-faced man with pimply face, but what he wondered why the mare did n't take the bit in her teeth and end it. Foley drew the sensitive beast to a standstill with a vicious jerk of the reins, and offered Nat a seat by his side in the sulky. Nat shook his head. In addition to the aversion he felt to the driver he had no intention of imposing his weight upon the mare. He stopped to stroke her sleek neck, and she in response to the big tender hand brushed his ear with her velvet nose.

"Did n't know but what ye might be in a hurry," suggested Foley with a significant leer.

The attentions of Nat to Julie Moulton were known to all the world.

"No," answered Nat.

"I s'pose," said Foley, "you're on your way to pay yer respects to the young couple."

"No," answered Nat, "I'm going to see Julie Moulton."

Foley drew a deep breath. He could scarcely believe in the good luck which had selected him as the bearer of the news.

"Ye don't mean to say ye ain't heern?" he drawled.

"Heard what?"

"That she and 'Gene is married — married yesterday?"

"Who —"

"She," interrupted Foley gayly. "Julie and yer brother 'Gene."

Foley shrank back from the heavy hand which suddenly fell upon his shoulder. The grip and the white face and the burning eyes searching his soul for the truth made him wince. He felt himself lifted from the sulky to the ground, where he was held at arm's length. Said Nat:

"Foley, if you have lied God help you! If you have n't — if you have n't, Foley, then God help me!"

Nat stepped into the sulky, lifted the reins, and Belle Marie in surprised response to the new touch

took the road as though winged. Mile after mile she sped on with the joy of a freed thing, and obeying the reins drew up in the yard of the little white house with a joyful whinny. Nat tossed the reins over her back and leaped to the ground. He strode to the front door and brought the knocker down with a report that rang through the house like a pistol-shot. It was Silas Moulton who answered it. Heavy-eyed, he asked:

“Have you heard?”

“Then it’s true?” demanded Nat.

Silas Moulton nodded and ushered him in as into a house of death. The father knew the boy as well as the brother knew him, and both knew there was in him little of brave good. He had the strength of an ox, but the heart of a fallow deer. He was well enough on the outside, but all wrong within — all wrong within.

When Nat Page came into the darkened parlor where Julie sat, he saw that the door on the opposite side of the room was just closing. He caught the creak of a board beyond, and knew that the feet which moved so stealthily away must be heavy, because the girl had often laughed at the way he himself made the floor boards creak which remained silent beneath the tread of herself, and her father. She rose to meet him with her cheeks flushed but her

head well up. She looked now more like a mother brought to bay in defense of her young than a bride. Her eyes were tender, almost pleading, while her attitude was defiant. As he came nearer to her she advanced to meet him, trying hard to smile.

"Nat," she said, "you have come to wish me happiness?"

For a moment he made no reply, confused by the whole situation, like an untamed lion crouching before the first stinging cut of a trainer's whip. The only thing of which he was conscious was of his great love for her which seemed to persist after it should not.

"You have come to wish me happiness, Nat?" she repeated.

"From the first time I saw you I have wished you nothing else," he answered.

"And now?" she asked, as though she must have a direct response to her question.

"Now," he answered steadily, "more than ever before."

For a moment the tenderest smile he had ever seen hovered about her lips and then, dumbly, she held out her hand.

He took it, and as he felt her warm pulse beat against his palm the world swam for a moment. It seemed that even then he had a right to her. This

was some terrible mistake. It could not be that in so brief a time she had been snatched from him forever.

"Julie," he asked again, "is it true?"

"It is true," she answered.

Then his vision cleared, as it always did at the big crises of his life, and he dropped her hand. He saw that there was nothing to be done here. He forced a smile, because he would not hurt her even with the pain of his own hurt.

"Well," he said, "then I guess I'll be going."

His words sounded so final that she thrust out her hand and placed it on his arm.

"You will come and see me often?"

He considered a moment. It was difficult to refuse her anything, but at present this seemed an impossible thing to promise.

"I go into camp next week," he answered.

"Oh, but —"

She checked herself.

"I had forgotten. I wish you luck in your business."

"Thanks," he answered.

Because he stood before her so sturdily and without complaint, because he neither questioned her right of action nor whined over the past, because even now he sought not his own happiness but hers,

Julie with a pain in her throat came to a new knowledge of what a man may be. Her head dropped and her breath came fast.

He turned to go, but half-way to the door stopped.

"If ever you should need me, I will come," he said.

At that she raised her head proudly.

"Why should I need you?" she asked.

"If I can help it, you won't," he answered.

He walked steadily because he knew exactly what was before him to do. As he passed through the kitchen, he grasped Silas by the hand and placed his other on the drooping shoulders of the mother.

"I have wished Julie happiness," he said. "I guess this will turn out better than you think."

"If it had only been you," exclaimed the mother, looking up.

Nat turned away his head.

"You must n't talk like that," he pleaded.

Silas' eyes leaped to the clenched jaw of the young man, and with sudden understanding he whispered:

"He's out there—in the barn."

"I know," nodded Nat. "I shall see him and wish him happiness too."

Nat found the big barn door half open, but as he entered he could see little because of the heat in

his eyes. He stood there helpless, listening to the rattle of the halter chains about him, to the low bleat of greeting from the ever hungry sheep, to the restless moo of the kine. Presently the shadows began to dissolve, and he made out the bulging masses of hay beneath the cobwebbed windows under the eaves, then the boarding below, then the feed-box to the right, and near the box the outline of a man. Here his eyes rested. He saw that it was 'Gene. The latter was leaning against an upright with a pitchfork within easy reach.

Nat waited until he could see clearly, for he was not fool enough to take chances on being speared. He had too much in hand for that. He studied his brother's face with curious interest. The boy looked older than when he left, but he had lost much of his freshness. It was the age of the city he showed and not the age of the hills. He seemed heavier and hardier, and Nat was glad of that. 'Gene would need his strength. Studying him more keenly, Nat could see no gain in the deeper strength; the eyes were still shifty and the mouth loose. Yet over and over to himself Nat declared there must be something which had attracted the girl, something which he himself must have missed! He must cling to this fact or the temptation to batter down the man would overcome him. So long as he was able to



reason, he realized that this course would do little good; he could not batter down with the man Julie's love for him. It was probable, unless 'Gene had greatly changed, that if allowed to go on in his own way he might accomplish this himself. But neither would that do. He might by this course kill the woman too. Nat knew how deeply she must love to have been so blinded to the true nature of the man which even he had read since they were boys together. He knew her contempt of weakness, of hypocrisy, and had heard her comments upon these same flaws in other men. Even if 'Gene had deceived her by lying, why, that made no difference now. The point was that the man must be made to live up to her ideal of him. That was what remained for Nat himself to accomplish. That and nothing else.

He found his voice.

"'Gene," he began, "they tell me that you are married to Julie Moulton."

"They tell you right, Nat," answered 'Gene.

It was like a fresh blow to hear it from 'Gene's lips.

"You have a good wife, 'Gene," he said.

"I'm glad ye like her," sneered 'Gene.

It was a full minute before Nat trusted himself to speak again.

"And now that you have a wife, what are you goin' to do?"

"That's my business."

"Have you any money?"

'Gene squinted a moment at his brother's eyes to make out the intent of that question. Then he answered:

"Have ye any to lend?"

"If ye need it," answered Nat.

Still 'Gene hesitated, but this was too good an opportunity to miss.

"Then," said 'Gene, "if ye feel like doin' a favor, ye might lend me a little."

"I will lend you all I have," Nat answered promptly. "And after that what are you goin' to do?"

"I don't know just yet," answered 'Gene.

"You have n't any job?"

"I'm goin' to look around a little," 'Gene parried.

Nat was breathing more heavily, but he was still in good control of himself.

"No need of that," he said. "I'll give ye a job."

"What is your job?" asked 'Gene suspiciously.

"In the woods. I've taken a contract for some pine on Eagle."

"So?" queried 'Gene indifferently.

"Ye'll begin next week — Monday."

"So?"

To tell the truth, 'Gene had no great relish for such a job. He objected to the hardship involved, and he objected to remaining so closely under Nat's eyes. Then, again, he was very comfortable where he was for the present.

"I reckon I can pull 'long without that kind of a job," he replied.

For a second Nat watched him. Then he slipped his leash. With a quick run in he sent the pitchfork flying across the barn with a swift side kick of his foot. This brought him face to face with his brother, but he still pressed his two clenched fists close to his side.

"Good God!" he panted; "but ye *will* take that job. Ye'll come into camp at five o'clock a week from next Monday morning and before spring I'll make a man of ye."

Though Nat made no motion to strike, 'Gene raised his arm above his eyes with a startled cry.

"Quit!"

"Not till I've made a man of ye," ran on Nat. "She thinks she married a man, and now she's goin' to have a man. I don't know how ye've made

her believe in you, 'Gene, but ye 've done it. Maybe there's good in ye I don't see — maybe there is. I'd trust the girl to see straight in most things and I ought to trust her now. But, right or wrong, she is n't goin' to see any different. You're goin' to be what she thinks ye are. You're goin' to walk straight and talk straight and act straight. You're goin' to be a man and show folks she married a man."

'Gene had lowered his arm.

"What blamed business is this o' yours?" he demanded sulkily.

"I'm makin' it my business," answered Nat.

'Gene's eyes narrowed. Then he said:

"I see. Kind of liked her yourself, did n't ye?"

"Yes," answered Nat.

"An' now ye're kinder sore?"

"If ye mean by that it hurts, I'll answer ye fair; it does."

"Well," sneered 'Gene, plucking up courage, "she's mine now. Don't forget that."

With the cry of a wounded animal Nat rushed in. But 'Gene was ready and met him with a blow on the jaw. He might as well have leveled his fist at one of the oak uprights. Nat never paused, but with a heavy blow from the shoulder sent 'Gene staggering into the middle of the barn floor. There he

waited for his brother to recover. But the latter, shielding his face with an arm, only backed off.

"Come on," called Nat, "come on, for it's like that I'll do, brother or not; it's like that I'll do until ye get enough of her in your heart to stand up and fight me off."

He followed after 'Gene and struck him once more.

"Ye've got the size and strength of a man," he cried. "Why don't ye use it like a man? Ye'll need it; by the good God, ye'll need it before the spring comes."

"Quit!" called 'Gene.

Nat seized him by the shoulder and tried again to rouse him. He could n't maul a man who would n't fight, and yet he knew from the strength of that first blow that the boy had the brawn in him.

"Fight!" he choked. "Stand up and fight!"

Writhing beneath the sting of being thus man-handled, 'Gene snatched a hungry look at the pitchfork. Nat waited in eager hope that he would come back at him. Even a whipping at 'Gene's hand would have been a welcome relief from watching the husband of Julie cow back like a frightened dog. But it was no use. The boy had the heart of a fallow deer.

"Then," concluded Nat, "if ye won't fight, ye'll

come into camp a week from next Monday morning — at five o'clock. D' ye hear?"

"I ain't deaf," 'Gene retorted feebly.

"An' if ye don't come, I'll find ye and bring ye — I'll find ye if I have to go to Hell to find ye. For we'll make a man of ye yet, 'Gene."

'Gene made no answer.

"Tell me when ye're comin'," commanded Nat.

"At five o'clock a week from Monday," growled 'Gene.

"And ye'd better start early 'cause it's a long walk from here. And if ye aren't there at five-thirty, I start back here to St. Croix to find ye."

Nat turned and walked out of the barn. He took the road home and never stopped until he reached the house on the crest of the hill. He opened the door and went in. What happened there is the secret of a man's soul and shall remain a secret.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### *The Making of a Man*

THE snow came early that fall, and in four days covered the ground a foot and a half deep. Every inch of it added a chance to the success of Nat's venture. He had been in the heart of his pine for a week with Bartineau and half a dozen, others, making preparations for the main crew, which was due on Monday. They had erected a camp and a cook-house, and a barn for the horses, and had blazed the roads they would need to the river at the foot of the mountain. In all this Nat had done the work of four men. He was often up at three in the morning and toiled until he had only strength enough to drag his heavy feet to his bunk at night.

"Sacré!" complained Bartineau. "We have time enough."

"Too much time," answered Nat.

"Then what the devil —"

Nat placed his hand on Bartineau's shoulder. Heavy-eyed, he looked into the rough misshapen face of his friend.

"Pierre," he said, "I can't sleep."

"And your skin burns and you have little spots all over you?" questioned Pierre eagerly.

"No," smiled Nat; "it is n't the smallpox."

Pierre looked disappointed.

"If only you would get that and let me pay you back —"

"No, it is n't the smallpox," repeated Nat.

But nevertheless Pierre watched him closely until he saw the amount of work Nat was doing. Then he shook his head disappointedly. A man with the smallpox could not lift a log that a horse could n't budge.

Bartineau was in charge of the stable. It was a position of responsibility second only to Nat's. Men and horses work together in the woods. Cripple one and you cripple the other. Bartineau had his opinions about the superiority of the society of horses to that of men. He slept in the barn as a matter of preference, and when he had a pipe to smoke, smoked it there. So too he aired all his opinions to his horses except when he had anything to say against a man, and then he said it to his face.

On the Monday morning that his crew of ten men arrived, Nat sat on the sill of the barn by the side of Bartineau. It was half-past four and



the horses had eaten their oats and were now munching the last few wisps of hay in their cribs. Bartineau was watching Nat's face in the light of the lantern by his side. The latter was staring down the wood-road fading off into the sentinel pines.

"Sacré!" Pierre finally exploded. "What do you see — a loup garou?"

"I'm waiting for another man," answered Nat.

"Eh? But they are all here."

Bartineau counted them off on his thick stubby fingers.

"Stevens, Ladoux, Campbell, Trumbull, Allen, Martin, Corbeau, Mullen, Clancy and Red George. Red George came an hour ago."

"There is one more," answered Nat.

"Eh?"

"'Gene Page," said Nat.

"I do not know this 'Gene Page."

"He is my brother."

"Tiens — a good man then."

"Not a good man yet," answered Nat. "But before spring perhaps we'll make a good man of him."

From the bottom of his pocket Bartineau scraped together some loose bits of tobacco, which he placed in the palm of his left hand. He produced an old

clay pipe, and sticking this into a corner of his mouth rolled his tobacco, palms together.

"Pierre," said Nat, "I shall put him to work here with you."

Bartineau glanced up quickly.

"I need no one here," he answered jealously.

"Use him any way you will and forget that he's any brother of mine," said Nat.

"Eh bien."

Nat glanced at his watch. It was a quarter of five. If 'Gene did not arrive within fifteen minutes, it meant a walk of twenty miles back to St. Croix and from there — God knows where. But if he found the boy gone to Rio de Janeiro again, there he would follow him. He would follow him around the world and back again, and this pine on Eagle could go to the devil.

In the shack to the right there was a great rattle of tin dishes and the growling early morning talk of the men. The smell of strong coffee scented the cold air.

"Had your grub?" questioned Nat.

"And you — is it that you have eaten?"

"Not yet."

His eyes were again trying to pierce the heavy shadows which clotted the snow. He listened, but heard no sound. He recalled his talk with 'Gene

and made sure that he had made no mistake in the day or time. This brought his thoughts back again to Julie, who for a week now had been a wife. He had not seen her since the day he left her, but at times he felt as though he should go mad with the yearning to look upon her face again. The desire was an acute pain which gnawed at his heart, choked him in the throat, and blinded his eyes. It came at night and it came in the day, and the fight against it left him limp. And yet, though she was the cause of it, he could in no wise put blame upon her. There was neither anger nor jealousy in his heart, neither hope nor regret. He knew that Julie saw 'Gene as his mother saw 'Gene — fair to look upon, big of body, ready and pleasant of tongue. So women had seen 'Gene since he was a small boy and seen nothing else of him. None of them ever had occasion to watch him in a man crisis, for even at school, when trouble threatened, he was bold enough before the petticoats and never ran until the latter were out of sight. But men knew him instinctively, even as Silas did, who had seen little of him.

Once again Nat glanced at his watch. It lacked five minutes of five. He rose to his feet and took up his belt a notch. Then in the yellow alley of light made by the lantern he saw the form of a

man emerge from the pines and step heavily towards the camp. Nat went forward to meet him.

"'Gene," he called.

The latter wheeled in his tracks as suddenly as though expecting a blow.

"I've been waitin' grub for ye," said Nat.

"It's you, is it?" growled 'Gene.

He came nearer.

"See here, Nat," he began. "I jus' came up to tell ye I had another job in the village."

"Ye have a job here," answered Nat.

"I've got a better one."

"How much?"

"Ten dollars a week."

"I'll pay ye fifteen."

"It is n't so much the money —" answered 'Gene.

"What is it, then?"

"Well, ye see, Julie —"

At the name Nat stiffened.

"Did she say she did n't want ye to work for me?"

"Not exactly, but — well, it's rather tough havin' to be away from home so much."

"Ye can go back every Saturday."

"Back to St. Croix?"

"Back to St. Croix."

"How?"

"Walk."

'Gene laughed sulkily.

"I see myself," he answered. "It took me four hours to make it this mornin'."

Nat frowned. The man would allow a four hours' walk to stand between him and Julie! He himself would walk twenty-four for just a sight of her. In disgust Nat turned away.

"Here's Bartineau," he called over his shoulder. "Ye'll help him with the horses."

"I'll be damned if I will," sputtered 'Gene.

Nat turned back. He walked to his brother's side.

"Get into the barn," he called as he would to a dog.

'Gene squared his shoulders. The sight of this was like balm to Nat. He waited hopefully. But in the end 'Gene slinked past to the side of Bartineau.

In the stable that morning 'Gene gave vent to his wrath on the horses. He was leading out Nat's own team when the animals, becoming frightened at a moving shadow, crowded back upon him. He had a whip in his hand and brought it down sharply across the quivering flanks of the nearer one. It was at this point that some demon sprang out of

the dark and gripping his throat held on. For a moment 'Gene thought it was an animal. He could see little, and the breathing was not that of a man. Nat freed him from Bartineau at the point where things swam black before 'Gene's bulging eyes and he seemed about to die.

"Sacré!" cried Bartineau, straining towards the two. "If ever again that dog of a man comes into this barn —"

"I saw," interrupted Nat, "but you came at him in the dark. That — that is why he did not fight better. This is the husband of Julie Moulton."

Nat paused for breath. The words choked off his wind as though Bartineau had in turn seized him by the throat.

"You came at him in the dark," continued Nat. "In fair fight I do not know. This is the husband of Julie Moulton."

"Eh?" snapped Bartineau. "I care not whose husband he is. I care not whose brother he is. I will fight him now."

He stepped back and squared his shoulders and lowered his head. Nat placed a hand upon his arm.

"To-night," he said quietly. "To-day I need you both."

All that day Nat kept the men in sight for fear

of the axes. With axes a fight is a serious affair. But though the two exchanged ugly glances, they worked on without further conflict — Bartineau in stolid silence and 'Gene with occasional overtures of peace. 'Gene might as well have talked to a hungry gray wolf. With the horses out of the barn, Nat set both Bartineau and 'Gene at work on the logs. The latter could lift as much as two men, and Nat was glad that several of the crew had a chance to see this. He would give every man in camp this chance before he was done.

On the whole, Nat was sorry that a crisis had been reached so soon, for he had hoped for time in which to train his brother a little. If the latter were defeated in this first battle, it might take away much of his scant courage and this would make it go harder with him in later contests. On the other hand, if he won, then this would make a fine beginning. It would put heart into him.

Twice during the day Nat spoke words of warning to 'Gene.

"Take it easy," he advised. "Don't use up too much of your strength."

Then in fairness he told Pierre Bartineau what he had told 'Gene.

"It was well said," was all that Bartineau answered.

That night before dinner Nat spoke again:

"Do not eat too much; enough, but not too much."

With the dark and the tension of the day and the face of Bartineau scowling at him for twelve hours, 'Gene was growing uneasy. It was one thing to fight in the heat of the moment and another to go at it deliberately. He had never fought such a fight in his life.

"Why in hell should I fight the Cannuck?" demanded 'Gene. "I'm not holdin' any grudge ag'in him."

"You," answered Nat, "are the husband of Julie Moulton. That is why. The husband of Julie Moulton must fear no man. You have much fighting before you until in the end you fight me."

"Don't — don't ye go too far," cried 'Gene.

"As soon as ye fight off me, that will be the end," explained Nat. "Ye have only to speak the word when ye want to try."

"You're two years older than me," whined 'Gene, falling back upon a boyhood argument.

"Yes," admitted Nat. "But now you're man-size. If you're man enough to marry Julie, ye've got to be man enough to fight me. I'd ask the same of any one in the world who married Julie."



"You're just mad cause ye got left," snapped 'Gene.

Nat turned white.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "If I was mad — I'd — I'd kill ye."

'Gene shrank back and Nat soon regained his self-control.

"But I'm not mad," he explained more quietly. "Now listen. Bartineau has a trick of running in under the arms. Look out for that. He has a grip that never lets go. He is slower on his feet than you. Keep him moving. He is tough in the body; you will do more with one good blow under the chin than with twenty on the body."

The instructions were given with brutal calmness. Nat caught a shifty look in 'Gene's eyes which meant but one thing, a passion for escape. His heart grew bitter and he seized his brother's arm.

"Husband of Julie," he said, "if ye do not beat him to-day, ye must try again to-morrow. So until ye do beat him. If ye run — then I will follow. Don't look around any more. Keep your mind on what ye've got to do."

That night after supper Nat rose from his place at the table and made a speech. It was a wise speech for one of his age.

"Men," he said, "I don't believe in fighting in camp, because livin' here together the fighting grows. But when something nasty does come to a fight I want to see the fight done fair and done in the open. It looks like a bad beginning to start a row on the first day, but this time I happened to be 'round when it started, and it looks to me as though there was just one way to settle it. 'Gene Page here, the husband of Julie Moulton, struck his horses. Pierre Bartineau saw him and struck 'Gene Page. I stopped the fight and told the men they could finish it to-night. So here they are, and if ye'll clear away the tables, we'll see an end to it."

A speech was never greeted with a noisier demonstration of applause. Though much of this was due to a desire to witness a good bout, there was much also that expressed an appreciation of the rough justice and fairness of the proposition. In a few minutes the tables had been swung to one side and the men had gathered in a generous circle. Nat fastened a nail to the ceiling and suspended from it a large lantern in order to give as much light as possible. Then he called upon Pierre Bartineau, who sprang forward eagerly. Then he called upon 'Gene Page, who came shiftily. Instantly Bartineau sprang

for his grip below the arms, but 'Gene dodged and, rushing, struck a blow that landed between Bartineau's eyes. That was the beginning, but the end did not come until forty minutes later. Both men were sore bruised and battered, and 'Gene by then had had enough. In sheer desperation he made a final heavy, lunging blow. It took Bartineau once more between the eyes and the latter dropped. Nat counted off ten seconds and then, proudly lifting his head, he made the announcement:

"Men, the fight is won by 'Gene Page, the husband of Julie Moulton."

Half blinded and dazed though he was, 'Gene strutted into the group of men who were noisily applauding him, while Nat crossed to the side of Pierre Bartineau. The latter opened his eyes again to consciousness.

Nat gripped his hand and helped him to his feet.

"Mon Dieu," stammered Bartineau. "I did n't think he had it in him."

"Ye don't know him," answered Nat. "But you made a brave fight, Pierre."

## CHAPTER XXV

### *'Gene the Gallant*

THE result of the fight with Pierre Bartineau, who was well known to all as a sturdy man with his fists, was to give 'Gene a place at once among his fellows. They had seen him fight fair and fight hard with a strength entitled to respect. Those who until now had looked askance at him either because of the town gossip or a certain shiftiness in his bearing revised their opinion before the testimony of their eyes and accepted him into their midst. Nat noticed this with a good deal of satisfaction, and turned his attention to the problem of getting his pine started down the mountain side.

As for 'Gene, his new position pleased him mightily. He felt himself a good deal of a hero and did considerable strutting. The mountain air cleansed his blood and his brain and put new vigor into his arms and legs. The exercise whetted his appetite, the simple food satisfied it, and he slept soundly. With this and the reaction from

the tension of the previous week his spirits revived to a point where he did not find even the work irksome. At night, with the crowd gathered around the big wood stove, he added further to his prestige by recounting tales of his travels in the tropics. His fights grew at a pace equaling Falstaff's. It seemed as though his days on board the ship had been filled with nothing but mutiny and threatened piracy, while when on shore he had met with an adventure at every turn of the street. He was an acknowledged authority on tigers, and recounted such deeds of daring that all anecdotes of bears and mountain cats ventured by the others sounded as tame as a description of the frolicking of house cats. Occasionally Nat sat on the outskirts of the group and listened, but 'Gene's eyes were quick to spy him, so that the former never heard the choicest adventures.

But in the stable 'Gene did not talk much and did not again hit the horses. That man Bartineau struck a chill to his heart. It was impossible to escape those stolid dark eyes. They met him at every turn and refused to alter, no matter what overtures 'Gene made. They seemed ever to be watching, ever to be waiting, and 'Gene knew that if matters came to a second fight it would be a harder fight than the first. Therefore, in spite of

the knowledge of growing strength, in spite of the prestige of one victory, he resisted every impulse to hit the horses.

As for his relations with Julie, 'Gene was glad enough of a decent excuse of being out of the house for a while. The week before he left had been anything but pleasant. Silas looked as though he could murder him, while the two women haunted him like ghosts. Julie's face had remained as cold and white as death, even when she was most attentive. Every morning she waited breakfast for him and stood ready during the day to listen to whatever he had to say. But whether he pleaded or whether he sulked, whether he threatened or whether he spoke fair, made no difference. She answered him "Yes, 'Gene" and "No, 'Gene" without emotion. Every night before he went upstairs alone to the fair white room which had been her room she said simply, "Good-night, 'Gene." There was little joy in such conquest as this. And with all the romance gone from the episode his own thoughts bothered him. Left alone in this fashion, he found himself haunted by still another woman's face. He saw again the shadowy bedroom of the little flat, and peering from the shadows the gray eyes of her he had left. They were even more difficult to understand than Julie's.

But among the pines, where he had little time to brood over anything, he escaped them, for he was left so dog-tired at night that nothing came but oblivion.

So the first Saturday came, and with it a snow-laden gale that beginning at dawn swirled about the mountain all day. Before night some two feet of snow had fallen, and yet the storm raged only the fiercer. The pines drooped heavy with their white weight. It was the sort of day that made the prospect of Sunday seem very welcome to all hands. But at two o'clock that afternoon Nat strode up to 'Gene, as the latter leaned on his axe to watch a big pine topple over at which he had been hewing for an hour, and said as simply as though it were only the matter of stepping around the corner:

"Ye 'd better be startin', 'Gene."

"Startin' for where?" demanded 'Gene.

"For home."

"Home? Ye don't think I 'm goin' back to St. Croix this sort of weather."

"You are goin' back to your wife for over Sunday," nodded Nat.

'Gene glared at him a moment and turned away.

"Well, I 'm not," he answered.

"Then ye're ready to fight?" inquired Nat.

"Fight?" exploded 'Gene. "Can't ye think of

nothin' else? Has a man got to keep fightin' here for his rights?"

"He's got to keep fightin' to go ag'in his rights," answered Nat very deliberately. "Julie is expectin' ye."

"Expectin' me?" laughed 'Gene. "Good Lord, don't ye know —"

But 'Gene did n't finish. He saw that Nat did n't know, and some instinct warned him that it was better he should not know. Some instinct and some remnant of pride warned him to keep silent on this point. His brother probably thought the girl was head over heels in love with him. So long as he thought that — well, it gave him a weapon anyway. He made a little experiment in order to watch its effect.

"I s'pose she is," he said slowly. "Girls are queer, are n't they? I expect she's been cryin' half the time just because I had to go away."

Nat winced. The pain of the picture left his face as bloodless as though he had been hit. Well pleased with the result, 'Gene persisted.

"She's got her father and mother, but that don't make no difference. When a man's away from his woman or a woman's away from her man, the house don't seem the same."

Nat drew back as though to escape.



"Nat," 'Gene followed him up. "ye don't know what 'tis to have a pair of warm arms around yer neck — arms like Julie's."

"For Gawd's sake," exclaimed Nat, "don't talk like that! It ain't decent."

"Wait till ye get a wife like Julie," answered 'Gene maliciously.

"Get out of here! Get back to her," Nat shouted.

"If it was possible, Nat, I'd go. There ain't nothin' would stop me. But with the snow like this —"

He leveled his eyes upon his brother. The frozen bits of ice swept into his face. He shook his head.

Nat took him by the shoulder and turned him round.

"Ye 'll go back to St. Croix to-night," he choked. "Ye 'll start this minute."

"Ye want to kill me?" whined 'Gene.

Nat lifted his fist.

"Get out!" he cried.

'Gene threw down his axe and stumbled off. Nat watched him until he was out of sight, and then, finding Bartineau, gave a half-dozen orders.

"I shan't be back until Monday morning," he concluded.

"Sacré! Ye are n't goin' home in such a devil's storm as this?"

Without replying Nat turned into the pines and, picking up 'Gene's tracks, followed after. He had no idea of trusting the boy to get home alone, for in the first place 'Gene's heart might fail him and he would then stop at the first farmhouse; in the second place his legs might fail him and he might die by the roadside. For Julie's sake, that must not be. So long as 'Gene's life was precious to her, so long must 'Gene live; so long must he be responsible for 'Gene's life. There was much work waiting for him that he had planned to do between this time and Monday morning but that did not count against this heavier duty.

For the first three miles down the crude road which led to the foot of Eagle, Nat kept his brother in sight without being seen himself. 'Gene took the journey with little heart. He walked slowly with much resting and did not stand up sturdily against the whipping gusts of wind. He swore a great deal in frenzied anger at the obstacles in his path instead of meeting them with a challenge. In this spirit a man cannot walk far; in this spirit he is easily overcome.

So 'Gene came to the foot of the mountain and into the main road. It had taken him almost two hours when he should have done it in less than an hour. Nat, at his heels, grew impatient, and

though a half-dozen times upon the point of urging him on thought better of it. So 'Gene came to the home of Timothy Dutton towards four in the afternoon. Here he paused a moment and then, walking to the door, knocked. He was evidently given welcome, for the door opened and he went in. But Nat buttoned his reefer close about his throat and squatted in the snow outside. He gave the boy time to get warm and come out again, but still the door remained closed. Then he followed after, and in response to Timothy's welcome strode into the kitchen, where he found 'Gene with his coat, hat and boots off sitting before the stove. Near him sat the youngsters Josh and Ebenezer, with the blood high in their cheeks from the tales to which they had been listening.

"Kind of expected the bridegroom to be out a night like this, but what in thunder takes *you* home, Nat?" exclaimed Timothy.

'Gene rose from his chair and faced his brother.

"I have business at St. Croix," answered Nat.

"Well, I reckon it ain't more pressin' than 'Gene's, and he allows that he'll spend the night here. Ye'd better stay too."

"A man's a fool to try to get to St. Croix to-night," growled 'Gene.

"Maybe," answered Nat curtly.

"Ye don't mean to say, now, ye are goin' to try it?" put in Mrs. Dutton, bustling up. "Land sakes, there's room in that bed for two of ye. I've just opened it up to air."

"You're good," answered Nat. "But I guess we'd better go on."

Mrs. Dutton smiled benignly.

"Now don't tell you've gone and fallen in love yourself, Nat," she answered.

"Is n't there anything else that would take a man out in a storm?" he asked.

"Love and death — in a storm like this," answered Mrs. Dutton. "There ain't no sickness in the family?"

"No," Nat assured her.

"Then ye'd better stay till morning 'cause love will wait," she concluded.

He shook his head rather soberly.

"It does n't wait no more than death," he replied.

He buttoned up his reefer and glanced again at 'Gene. The latter, with his back to the stove, was evidently relying on a belief that Nat would refuse to make a scene here. But a second look at his brother's face gave scant hope.

"Come," said Nat. "It's harder goin' every minute."

"Go along if ye want," growled 'Gene.

'Gene turned to the others, as though for support, but they remained silent. Both Mr. and Mrs. Dutton caught an expression in the older brother's face which told them that here was some crisis which would brook no intervention. They waited uneasily. 'Gene reached for his boots and drew them on. He took his time, but Nat showed no impatience. In fifteen minutes they were out in the storm again.

The air seemed colder than ever after the warm shelter of that kitchen. The snow stung their faces and clogged their steps. They had no sooner reached the road than, in desperate fury, 'Gene turned on his brother.

"Damn ye!" he choked.

"Save your breath," advised Nat. "Ye'll need it."

Inch for inch, the two men measured the same; pound for pound, they weighed the same. The same blood flowed in their veins, and as far as muscle went they could lift the same weight. For the matter of ten seconds they faced each other out here in the swirling snow with no one to interfere. Yet once again, at the end of this space, 'Gene's head dropped, and he stumbled ahead without striking a blow. Nat led and made

the trail, neither speaking nor looking at his brother.

This was one of the nights when Nat felt the need of being near to Julie, the wife of 'Gene. This was one of the nights when he could n't resist the call of his heart. Even without 'Gene he would have come just the same. The sting of the elements took him back again to the night on the mountain top when he had watched by her side. He footed the road joyfully with that memory to cheer him. Each whipping cut of iced wind, each drifting mound of snow that he tramped down, each heavy mile made him gladder as it brought him nearer her. Back of his own personal joy, back of the hunger of his own heart, lay the conviction that even in this humble way he was bringing her joy in bringing back her man to her.

Behind him, that man stumbled, cursing the night, cursing the storm, cursing him who had forced him into it.

When an hour after dusk they reached the storm-bound house at St. Croix, Nat stood one side to allow 'Gene to pass. The latter went on with a muttered threat.

He tried the front door and found it locked. He pounded with his numbed fists.

From the roadway Nat saw a light move rapidly

from the sitting-room to the hall. He saw the door swing open and caught a glimpse of Julie's dark hair, of her red cheeks, as with a startled cry she drew back at sight of 'Gene. He saw his brother push in, and then heard the door close with a vicious bang as 'Gene slammed it to.

That was all, after his long walk; that was all the man had to buoy up his spirits with over the long walk back to Hio, which still lay ahead of him. That was all, but enough. The heaviness left his legs and the rancor left his heart. He kept that face before him until two hours later he placed the key in the lock of the door of the house on the hill and went in. It was dark and bitter cold within, but he stumbled into a chair. Then, with his head bowed between his hands, he fought back the hot thoughts which the place conjured up.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### *The Outcasts*

THE following month was a busy time for Nat Page. He found more trouble than he had anticipated in getting his lumber to the river-bank. The roads were steep and rough, and the deepening snow further clogged his progress. In order to keep to his schedule he was forced to hire more men and horses and look more sharply than ever after details. This was good for him, even though it added a still heavier weight of responsibility than he was now carrying. It gave him little time for brooding.

As for 'Gene, his reputation as a brave and good man continued to grow. The mountain air and the hard exercise sweetened and hardened him clear to the marrow. Men, instead of jesting loosely with him, spoke him fairly, and women who had once ignored him nodded pleasantly as they met him in the village during his weekly visits home. Because all this was new to him and because, say what you will, men like to be well thought of, he



enjoyed himself much better than he had anticipated. He swaggered a bit, to be sure, still talked over-boastfully and was eager for a quarrel, but in most ways he conducted himself well.

He even received some encouragement from Julie's attitude towards him. A woman could hardly be a woman and not appreciate the effort of that long walk home every week through snow and wind. If at first she had been only startled and suspicious, this wore away at the end of the month, for on these visits he conducted himself as well as she could ask. He was both mild-mannered and pleasant-spoken, and demanded of her nothing more than she could give. As a result, the color crept back to her cheeks and the tenseness left her lips. This weekly act of devotion seemed more like something Nat might do. It led her to hope that, after all, the blood relationship counted for something.

In the meanwhile though Nat Page had no direct communication with Silas, other men told him that Julie was growing even more beautiful and that she seemed very happy.

"That is good," answered Nat. "That is as it should be."

Good for all the world save for him alone. To picture her as more beautiful made it no easier

for him. He was glad she was happier, but even this made it no easier for him. In fact, he did n't see where all this was going to end, and in that not even Father Laramie, the good priest from St. Croix, who sometimes came to camp to look after the souls of his half-dozen parishioners, could help him. In a talk one night with this gentle man Nat had been led to confess. He was not of the faith and he had no religious motive in so doing, but his heart was paining him sore, and the priest of the tender eyes had led him on. As the latter had listened his eyes had grown still more tender.

"My son," said the priest when Nat was done, "you are acting worthily of that love."

"But how long will it last?" Nat had cried. "Where will it end, for love for the one does not die, and hate for the other still lives."

"In time," answered the priest thoughtfully, "the love must kill the hate."

Then the priest, in an attempt to divert his mind from the present, had talked of all the good things which lie in eternity — of the peace and the love and the joy which would be his eventual reward. But when he had done, he turned away his head and to himself confessed:

"Mais c'est grand dommage."

Though pressed for time, Nat Page still accom-

panied his brother on his weekly pilgrimage for the sake of that brief glimpse of Julie at the door. From there he always returned to the house on the crest of the hill.

At the Lovell auction he had bought enough to completely furnish his house, including even kitchen utensils. The fact that the furniture was not new gave the rooms a settled appearance. The hand-made wooden chairs, the mahogany high-boy, the old clock and mirrors had been in use a hundred years before he bought them. They brought with them the comfortable hospitality of age.

It was on one Saturday night when it was bitter cold without that he was aroused from his brooding before the open fire by a weak knock upon the door. Hurrying to admit the late visitor, he found upon his doorstep Tommy Flint and his father. The two were half frozen and in a pitiable state of collapse.

"Lord, man," he exclaimed, as he dragged them in to a place before the fire, "what's the trouble?"

The old man bowed his face in his hands and began to cry, while Tommy spoke for him.

"Ma's dead," choked the latter. "An' the Deacon, he's turned us out."

"Your mother's dead?" exclaimed Nat, who now heard little of the village news.

"Dead and buried a week ago," sobbed Tommy.

"I had n't heard," answered Nat. "And ye say the Deacon turned ye out—a night like this?"

"He turned us out yesterday, but we crawled back and slept in the house. Then he found us again, and nailed up all the winders."

"Does n't seem's though a man would turn a dog out this weather," exclaimed Nat. "Look here, crowd up to the fire! Are ye hungry?"

With his teeth chattering, Tommy spread his purple hands over the flames and nodded.

"Sit where ye are, then, an' I'll see what I can get."

He kept a small supply of provisions in the house and cooked his own meals here every Sunday rather than go home. His mother had pleaded with him to come back, but there was too much of 'Gene in the old place. He could n't stand it.

He kindled the kitchen fire in a jiffy, and soon had a pan of ham and eggs on the stove. He set a table before the open fire in the sitting-room, and bringing in the food watched the man and boy devour it like starved wild creatures. He saw the hunger leave their eyes and the color return to their skin. The sight turned his thoughts away from himself and did him good. Furthermore, with the pres-

ence of these outcasts, the whole house came to life. It was the first time that any one except himself had been under this roof.

"What ye plannin' to do?" he asked Flint, as under the influence of food and warmth the old man partly recovered himself.

"I reckon Tommy an' I'll pull out," he answered thoughtfully.

"Where to?"

Flint shook his head.

"I dunno, but somewhere. If I was ten years younger, I'd go back to Jamaica."

"I guess ye're both better off where ye be," answered Nat.

"The p'int is, where be I?" answered Flint.

"You're here now, and ye'd better stay till ye get a chance to look around. Then Tommy can go to school."

"Ye mean we can stay right here in this house?" questioned Tommy, big-eyed.

Nat nodded.

"I kinder want to keep the house warmed up, and you and your father can help the old folks some around the farm. Are ye willin'?"

"Be I?" answered Tommy enthusiastically. "I'll tote all the water an' feed the cows, an' Dad —"

He paused, as though uncertain just what his

father would do, but the latter supplied the information:

“I’ll help ye, Tommy.”

“Thar ye be,” exclaimed Tommy, as though this concluded the matter.

“It’s a bargain,” answered Nat readily. “An’ there’s just one condition — that ye cut out the booze, Joe.”

Flint nodded.

“I was tellin’ Tommy this very night thet I was n’t goin’ to tech another drop — not if it was to save my soul from Hell.”

“Good,” drawled Nat. “And when your soul reaches thet point of danger, jus’ let me know.”

Tommy jumped up and insisted upon washing the dishes and putting away the supper things, while his father drew out his pipe and settled back in his chair before the fire as comfortably as though he had always been there.

Nat was well pleased with the arrangement. Not only would this keep the house alive during the week, but it gave him a chance to do something for Tommy. He had always liked the lad. When on the following Saturday he came home after his long walk from St. Croix, it was not to a cold and dark house but to lighted windows, a fire on the hearth, and a steaming hot supper prepared by

Flint. The latter was a good cook and had spent the entire day in getting things ready.

So a month passed, and life went better with Nat Page than it had the preceding month — better in every respect save one. Though the work in camp ran smoothly, though 'Gene continued to live up to his good name, though Julie so far as he could learn was happy, the ache would not out of his own heart. Night and day, day and night, he suffered like one tormented with a grievous illness. In spite of all he could do, the girl remained as the supreme necessity of his life. Work as hard as he might, he was left wakeful by thoughts of her. Whenever he did sleep, he dreamed of her and awoke with her name on his lips. He could n't make his life count for anything without her; he could n't disassociate her from either the past or the future. The past dated from the first time he saw her, and the future was a chaos of hopeless dreams.

His sole outlet was through 'Gene, and he paid heavily whenever he used this, for the latter now realized fully that the one vulnerable spot in his brother was his regard for Julie. Nat liked to send back to her every Saturday some little present. Once it was a few choice bits of spruce gum, another time a pretty strip of bark, and then again a brace of partridges which he spent a half-day in getting.

The first time he handed over these gifts to 'Gene the latter smiled contemptuously.

"What are these for?" he inquired.

"They are a present from you to your wife," answered Nat.

"What do you think she wants of those fool things?" demanded 'Gene.

"She will like them because you bring them," answered Nat.

"Huh," grunted 'Gene, "I reckon she gets enough to eat at home."

"Maybe," answered Nat. "But you will carry something to her every Saturday."

Though at first 'Gene thought this merely a bit of foolishness, he found that the little presents really did make a difference. Julie seemed actually pleased with the attention.

"It must have been a lot of trouble for you to get these," she said when he brought home the partridges.

"No great trouble," he answered lightly.

"Well, it's good of you, 'Gene. I'll cook them for your supper."

She did, and though she ate but little of them 'Gene finished them off with a decided relish.

In spite of this, 'Gene rebelled when Nat came back to camp one Saturday with a deer, and



cutting off a haunch of venison weighing some twenty pounds handed it to him to carry. This happened too on one of the worst nights of the winter. A snow-laden gale had swept over the mountain for two days, and when that noon the weary crew dragged themselves back to the shacks a chorus of snow-wraiths skirled out of the pines at their heels. A man could not raise his face to them, and breathing came hard. The trees were whipped until they soughed like the after moan of a tear-dry woman. There was no landscape, no horizon. The world was reduced again to chaos; to a swirling infinity of icy particles. Man did not belong in it, for it tested the strength of even the deep-rooted things.

It had been a bad day for Nat too. The very fury of the storm seemed to drive Julie deeper into his heart. When he had gone hunting for her that morning, it was because the call for her was so great that he could not even work. The best he could do was to fight that storm to get some little thing for her. The fiercer blew the gale, the more real it made his effort seem. So that day it was necessary, more than any other day which had preceded, for him to go to the house at St. Croix. It was after lunch that he gathered in his belt and nodded to 'Gene.

"Not to-day — not in this?" stammered 'Gene in amazement.

She'll worry if ye don't come," answered Nat.

"Worry be hanged!" answered 'Gene. "A wolf could n't live in this weather."

"Maybe not," answered Nat, "but a man can."

"I'll be damned if *I* can," replied 'Gene sulkily.

"Ye'll prove yourself a man by trying," concluded Nat.

As they started, Nat tossed the haunch of venison to 'Gene.

"For your wife," he said briefly.

'Gene was speechless. When he recovered his breath, he stifled an oath. Then, with a wicked smile about his lips, he picked up the venison and followed at Nat's heels. That was one of the days when Nat paid big, for from the time they started 'Gene never ceased talking of Julie. He pictured the glory of returning to her and waxed shamelessly eloquent over the tingle of her warm arms about his neck. But at the end of the tenth mile he stumbled and fell under the weight of his gift. Nat shouldered it the remainder of the way, and for the last mile also bore the weight of his brother on his shoulder. He made no reply to anything 'Gene said, though most of the way his fingers itched to throttle off the speech.

At the *door of the little house* Nat left his brother. After knocking for him, and stepping back quickly into the darkness, he saw the door open and caught a brief glimpse of the flushed face of Julie. She reached out her hands to help her husband over the threshold. A cry of wonder escaped her lips.

"On a night like this, 'Gene?" she exclaimed.

Speechless, numbed, 'Gene dropped the frozen haunch of venison at her feet.

Nat saw her stare in amazement at the gift. Then he heard her voice once more.

"Oh, 'Gene, 'Gene, I know you mean to be so good!"

Then she took his arm to steady him, and closed the door against the gale and against the man hidden in the icy shadows.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### *'Gene has a Drink*

**I**T was on the morning of March third that Al Foley slunk into camp for the ostensible purpose of selling tobacco, gloves, and woolen stockings. Because Foley moved like a gray wolf, Nat Page did not see him, but he learned that night at grub what the man was about, for at table the talk grew loud, and later that evening one half the men were drunk, among them 'Gene. Nat was stretched out on his bunk when he heard the rum-pus, but when he appeared it was too late. The men were as wild as hawks. 'Gene, with flushed face and bleared eyes, sat in their midst, telling stories both vile and fantastic. Foley was in a corner half hidden from sight. After a look around, Nat went outside and waited. There was nothing to be done at present. So long as the men had the liquor they had it and that was an end of it. He could not take it away from them as though they were small boys. He was not worrying so much about them as he was about

'Gene. As he thought of the wasted work of two months, his jaws became hard-set. But he waited — waited for 'Gene and waited for Foley.

It was not until eleven that the trouble began which Nat knew in the end was sure to begin. It was then that there came a quick exchange of the lie, and 'Gene found himself facing Bartineau once again. Neither man was mad drunk. They were both able to stand on their feet and both able to fight. When Nat came in, they were already at it. But it didn't last long. Within five minutes 'Gene was shielding his face and backing away before the stiff blows from Bartineau's fists. The latter followed him up, and Nat heard 'Gene exclaim:

“For Gawd's sake, quit!”

Bartineau lowered his fists. He stood amazed a second and then deliberately spat on 'Gene and turned away.

Without resenting even this, 'Gene huddled back into the crowd, which shied away to let him through.

This was the pity of the incident — two months of wasted work. In less than five minutes all Nat's efforts came to nothing; 'Gene had caved in before the whole camp. And yet it was not to him that Nat spoke when he entered, but to Al Foley.

He crossed the room and seized the latter by the shoulder. He dragged him out of the door, a cringing cur of humanity beseeching help of the camp. Two men started forward to protest, but changed their minds and stepped back into their places. Once outside, Nat spoke briefly.

"It was you who sold the stuff?" he demanded.

"You can't prove it," whined Foley.

That was true enough, for it was a matter of honor among the men not to tell where they secured their liquor.

"No," answered Nat slowly, "I don't suppose I can. But I reckon it ain't necessary."

"Ye 'd better keep yer hands off'n me," warned Foley. "I'll have the law on ye. Ye can't prove nothin'."

"I'm not tryin' to prove anything," answered Nat. "Have ye any more?"

"Ye can't prove nothin'," repeated Foley.

Nat reached down and tapped the man's pockets and found two pint bottles.

"I want those," said Nat.

He took them, and tossed the man a dollar. But the latter was too crafty to pick up the money, and it lay half buried in the snow where it fell. It was at this point that 'Gene staggered out, his head splitting, his tongue parched.

"You're just the man I want to see. Come on over to the barn."

"What for?" demanded 'Gene.

"I've got some more over there," answered Nat.

"Ye've got a drink?" exclaimed 'Gene in amazement.

"Lots of it. Come on!"

Dragging Foley along, Nat led the way to the barn and in. He handed one bottle to 'Gene.

"Here," he said, "help yourself. Keep your eye on Foley while I fasten up."

There were two side doors leading out of the barn, and Nat fastened both of these from the outside. When he came back, 'Gene had drank half the bottle. It restored his confidence.

"Say," he exclaimed to Nat, "I'm goin' back and knock the head off that Frenchman. I ware n't ready. I —"

Nat placed his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Later," he said quietly. "I want you to lick him when you're sober. To-night I want you to drink deep and hearty — drink all ye want. Maybe ye won't get another chance."

He turned to Foley.

"Foley," he said, "ye stay here an' keep him company. Every door in the barn is locked. There's two windows back of the horses, but I'm

goin' to stay out there and if ye open them I'll knock ye in again. This is your party, and now ye'll stick it through."

"What ye mean?" demanded Foley.

"Wait an' see," answered Nat.

He handed the second bottle to 'Gene.

"Here's some more. Drink it all if ye want — every last drop of it. I should n't wonder but what it's the last ye get in this camp."

"I dunno what ye're drivin' at," answered 'Gene good-naturedly, "but here's how."

He raised the bottle to his lips. Nat went out and turned the key in the padlock on the outside of the big main door. Then he took his position beneath the two windows and waited.

For the matter of five minutes he heard nothing from 'Gene except broken snatches of song and from Foley nothing at all. This was followed by a story, and then 'Gene's thoughts apparently reverted again to the fight.

"I tell ye I ware n't ready," he explained to Foley. "I licked him once an' I can lick him again. Have a drink."

Foley answered that he did n't want a drink.

"Have a drink," insisted 'Gene.

It was evident that 'Gene had staggered to his feet and moved towards Foley.



"Easy, 'Gene," Foley tried to placate him. "I'll have a drink, but keep yer shirt on."

Apparently Foley took a drink, for after a moment's silence 'Gene burst out:

"That's a good feller. Ye're a good feller, Al. Where be ye? It's so darned dark here I can't see ye."

"Thet's all right," answered Foley. "I'm here."

"Then come over where I can see ye. I want to show ye what I'm goneter do to that Frenchman. I want to show ye."

"I know ye can lick the tar outer him," Foley hastened to assure the man.

"But I want to show ye."

There was a sound of scuffling, and then Foley's voice came from a distance:

"Why don't ye curl up in the hay an' have a sleep, 'Gene?"

But 'Gene let out a wild whoop. The liquor was fast making him crazy drunk.

"Look out," he yelled, "for I'm a-coming."

Nat heard him stumble across the barn and heard Foley scrambling out of reach like a frightened rat. From this point on 'Gene grew wilder, both in talk and movement. He became surly at being balked, surly and vengeful.

"Let me git my hands on ye," he yelled. "Gawd, I'll show ye. I'm goneter have another drink and then I'll show ye."

Evidently he had another drink and then started once more after his man. With a grim smile Nat heard another wild scramble across the barn floor. The chase further excited 'Gene, and with one devilish yell after another he hounded the frightened man through the stalls and around to the floor again.

"Quit," screamed Foley.

"If I catch yer, I'll quit. I'm goneter choke ye, Foley. I'm goneter kill ye dead, Foley," screamed 'Gene.

Another wild scramble followed, and then the window back of the horses was thrown open and Foley thrust out a foot.

"Get back," warned Nat.

"Let me out," pleaded Foley. "He's crazy mad."

"Back!" answered Nat. "If he's mad, ye made him mad. Look out for him."

Foley withdrew his foot just in time to escape 'Gene's clutch. The next time Foley's voice was heard it evidently came from the barn loft to which he had climbed.

"If ye come up here," he screamed, "I'll kick ye back."

"I'm a-c-min'," answered 'Gene.

In terror Foley crossed a beam to the other side and scrambled to the floor. Once again he appeared at the window.

"Fer Gawd's sake, let me out," he whined, his voice dry and strained. "He'll murder me."

"He will if he catches ye," answered Nat. "But ye brought the stuff that's responsible."

"Whoop — he!" shouted 'Gene once again on the barn floor.

Foley's face disappeared from the window, and he bolted in past the horses.

So for another ten minutes the demonish chase in the dark continued. Foley was evidently getting winded, for Nat heard him stumble and fall several times. But 'Gene himself appeared tireless. He was now in a real delirium and shouted strange things, although he still clung to the obsession that involved the catching and killing of this man, who now assumed to him the form of a devil.

When next Foley appeared at the window, he himself was mad — mad and blind and frenzied with terror. He forced his head and shoulders through, his eyes bulging, his voice gone. Nat reached up and thrust him back, but with a whimpering, inarticulate cry the man again tried to force his body through. 'Gene could be heard coming

nearer and nearer. When Nat pushed Foley back the second time, the latter fell into the hands of 'Gene. He caught Foley by the throat with a howl that was more like that of a wild animal than a man.

Without hurrying, Nat went to the barn door, unlocked it, and made his way to where the two men lay. 'Gene was still strangling, with real murder now in his heart. Even when Nat seized him by the shoulder, 'Gene still held on.

"Let go," Nat commanded.

'Gene sprang to his feet and threw himself at Nat. The latter met him with a blow under the chin which knocked him senseless. Then he went out and found Bartineau. With the latter's help he dragged 'Gene to his bunk, where he strapped him in. He brought Foley back with him to his own bunk and there waited until the man recovered consciousness. The latter finally came to himself with a shriek for help, and Nat strode to his side. The fellow crowded back into a corner, feeling of his lame throat.

"Have a drink?" questioned Nat.

"Take him away. Don't let him have any more. Take him away," choked Foley.

"D'ye reckon ye'll ever come into this camp again?" asked Nat.

"S' help me, I won't," whined Foley. "Take him away and I won't come nigh here again."

"Sure?"

"I swear. I'll swear on the Holy Bible."

Nat dragged the man from his bunk.

"Then get out," he ordered.

Foley made his feet.

Nat tossed him an overcoat.

"Ye can sleep in the barn, but I don't want to find ye there in the morning."

He opened the door, and Foley dragged his weary limbs out into the cold and dark.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### *Aftermath*

FOR the next three days 'Gene was a worthless wreck. Feverish, light-headed, and nauseated, he lay in his bunk, a prey to fantasies of the past and present, receiving scant sympathy or attention either from his fellows or from Nat. When Saturday came around, he was stronger physically, but no whit more at peace with himself mentally. He stung with the knowledge that since the second fight with Bartineau the men were talking openly of his cowardice. They no longer stood in awe of his bulk or the strength of his arms. That forenoon, when to escape another day in confinement he shouldered his axe and went to work, he avoided a half-dozen fights only by skillful evasion of veiled taunts that were meant to egg him on. Consequently, when after lunch Nat made ready to go back to St. Croix, 'Gene made no protest, weak as he was.

At Dutton's Nat hired a team and drove the remainder of the distance. He had little to say

to his brother, but the latter did not misunderstand this silence. He knew that Nat was merely postponing his plans until Monday. What would happen then he could merely guess, and he cringed away from even guessing. One thing was sure, that unless he could think of some plan between now and then life would go hard with him in camp.

He strode into the house that night surly and ugly, but because he looked pale and wan Julie was unusually tender with him. As she met him at the door, she was so shocked by his pallor that she was instantly moved to pity.

"You don't look well, 'Gene," she exclaimed. "Have you been sick?"

"Sicker 'n a dog," he answered.

"You shouldn't have come out such a night," she said solicitously. "I'm afraid the walk has been too much for you."

The anxious words were sweet to him after the frowns and neglect of the last few days. She took his heavy coat, as he removed it, and placed it near the kitchen fire to dry. He studied her with a new-born hope. The room was warm from the stove stuffed full of wood, and cheery with the lighted kerosene lamp, but, after all, she was the warmest and cheeriest thing in it. After the cold, dark ride

by the side of the distant huddled figure of Nat, this contrast went to his head. His wife looked very beautiful this evening. He took his cue instantly from her present mood, and with a great show of fatigue seated himself in the chair which she placed for him near the open oven door.

"You've been working hard this week?" she questioned.

"He never lets up," answered 'Gene. "He's worse than a slave-driver."

Nat was never mentioned by name in this house. It was always just "He," but Julie had come to distinguish that personal pronoun from all others. It brought the color to her cheeks and then drove it out again.

"He's so strong himself I don't suppose he realizes," she replied feebly.

"He knows what he's doin' all right," answered 'Gene, his lips coming back over his irregular teeth. "An' I tell ye right now I'm gettin' tired of it."

"Perhaps the work is too hard," agreed Julie. "I don't think you ought to take this long walk home every week."

'Gene did not answer. He did not tell her that this time he had ridden most of the way. He liked her sympathy. She seemed most human when she was commiserating him.



"Why don't you lay off for a while!" she suggested, though it required an effort. She was barely becoming accustomed to his presence here over Sunday. He slept most of the day. But how it would be for a whole week she did n't know. There were moments — they were flashes of tenderness which came whenever she found him at the door snow-covered and weary, but with his little present to her in his hand — when the weary doubts and fears of the last few months were swept away and she saw him as he used to be. These led her to hope for great things — these and his record of unbroken steadiness. In every way he had improved wonderfully.

"Maybe I will. Maybe I'll lay off for good," he answered. "I can get a better job than that."

She was putting down a plate of biscuits on the table. She glanced up at him and found an expression on his face that frightened her. He rose to his feet.

"See here, Julie," he exclaimed, "I'm tired of bein' cooped up. I'd like to get back to the city where there's things doin'."

She shuddered. But she answered mildly:

"Yes, 'Gene."

"What d' yo say?"

"I think we're better off here," she replied without hesitation.

"How be we better off?"

"We 're at home, for one thing," she answered.

"Home?" he burst out. "This is a fine kind of home for me, is n't it? I'm here one day a week, and a lovin' peaceful time I have of it then with your father lookin' like he 'd like to stab me in the back, an' your mother lookin' like a mourner at a fun'ral, and you —"

"I'm doing the best I can, 'Gene," she interrupted.

"Well, your best ain't much then," he growled.

She sat down wearily. He was undoing all the work of the last few months. It was the 'Gene of that horrible first day who was now speaking. She tried to put that out of her mind and to recall how good he had been ever since then. She made every possible excuse for him; he was tired, overworked, worn out, and after a night's sleep would probably be himself again. Without answering she rose and went on with her work. But with his broad back to the stove he continued to talk, returning to his initial plaint which had seemed to meet with some success. He realized the hopelessness of trying to get out of this tangle by flight; Nat would keep his word and follow him wherever he might go. But if he could persuade Julie to come along with him, that would be a master stroke. Not

only would be then have the girl in his complete control, but Nat would be unable to say anything.

"I tell ye I can't stand it much longer, Julie. When a feller has a quiet place to come back to at the end of the day, he don't mind hard work, but when after it all there ain't nothin' but a bunk in camp, it's darned lonesome. When ye git married, ye kind of expect suthin' different."

"Supper's ready," she announced.

He seated himself at the table, and she took her place opposite him. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Moulton ever joined them at meals. She poured his hot tea and passed it to him.

"An' I think we'd git along better, Julie, if we was alone," he ran on. "We'd kind of get used to each other."

She met his eyes for a second, as though she actually found hope in the suggestion.

"I wonder if you're right, 'Gene," she answered.

"I know I am, Julie." He pressed home his point eagerly. "We are n't different from other people, and most of them get used to one another. If we were away and had a house of our own, we'd get along all right. It's the outsiders that make trouble."

"Outsiders?" she questioned.

She did n't recognize any outsiders. If it had n't

been for her mother and father, she would have gone mad during these last few months. Even Nat, who hovered ever in the background, was of help to her.

She felt safer for knowing that he was within reach.

"Every one's an outsider who stands between man and wife," he ran on.

She recognized some justice and some truth in his plea.

"Where would you go?" she asked timidly.

"I'd go to Boston, or New York," he added hastily. "I reckon New York's better. I can get a job there on some boat. I've had experience in seafarin' life."

"New York seems so far."

"The farther the better," he declared, unconsciously quoting Bella. "Maybe I could get on a steamer goin' to Rio. Ye used to want to go to Rio."

She smiled at the recollection. The name still had magic in it. She looked at him with fresh interest as he sat opposite her, leaning over the table. For a moment or two he looked like her old 'Gene. With the excitement of his plea his blue eyes had brightened as they used to do; and his face mellowed until once again he looked very much a boy. As a boy he seemed to her very strong and big.

"How we used to dream about Rio!" she laughed.

"We might go down there and live," he answered.

"Sailors can get a job anywhere."

"I think I'd like Rio better than New York," she admitted.

"Then let's go," he urged.

He shoved back his chair and stepped across to her side.

"Julie," he cried with an outburst of his old-time passion, "we can pack up to-morrow and leave here on Monday. We've got the money. I've saved every cent this winter. If ye want, we'll buy our passage an' take our honeymoon that way. We've never had a honeymoon." He held out his arms to her.

"Come. I love ye better 'n I've ever loved ye, an' if I did anything wrong ye've punished me 'nuff fer that. Lord knows I've had my lesson, Julie."

For a second she felt the same old restless tug at her heart which twice had made her forget herself. For a moment she lost herself in his blue eyes and thrilled with the power of his extended arms. She looked up into his eyes with her cheeks flushed a deep scarlet, her lips half open.

He had seen her like this before, and with the confidence bred of the past he stooped quickly and put his arms about her. He kissed her hair in an

ecstasy of surprise and delight. He lifted her head, and then he felt a quick struggle and found that she had escaped him.

It was the grip of his arms that frightened her off.

The voice and the eyes, those were the same, but the touch of him made her flesh crawl.

"No, no," she gasped, "not yet, not yet."

"It's kind of hard on a man when he can't kiss his own wife," he complained.

"I know, 'Gene," she answered. "But if you'll be patient — I'm trying hard to — to think of you as I did."

"Ye do too darned much thinkin'," he answered angrily.

"I know, but in another month or two if — if you're as good as you have been — And you have been good, 'Gene."

"Then ye won't go away with me now?"

"I could n't. For a second I thought I could. But now I know it's impossible."

"It's your folks that's p'isened ye against me," he growled; "your folks and him."

"Nat?" she gasped in astonishment.

"Him."

"Why, I have n't seen him at all," she answered with flaming cheeks. "I have n't spoken to him."

"But ye 've thought of him, have n't ye?"

From 'Gene's lips this sounded like an accusation of disloyalty. She lowered her eyes.

"Yes," she admitted, "I 've thought of him."

"Thet 's it," he nodded. "Damn his soul, I —"

"'Gene!"

"D' ye think I 'm blind and deaf? D' ye think I don't know a thing or two?"

"Know what?" she trembled.

"Thet 's all right, but there 's sech a thing as pressin' a man too hard," he hinted darkly.

As he left the room, she was upon the point of hurrying after him, but she checked herself. It was obvious enough what he had meant, and now after the first instinctive feminine rebellion at the charge she found herself repeating the suggestion to herself. Of course the vulgar innuendo that 'Gene's voice had carried with it was silly, but stripped of that, was n't it true that Nat had occupied her thoughts a good deal of late? The query left her thoughtful and a little bit excited.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### *The Stranger*

NAT PAGE had driven away that night without even so much as a glimpse of Julie at the door, and this made a lonesome trip of the ride back home. It was a clear, cold night, with the sky lighted by the stars alone. The latter, however, as though recognizing their responsibility in the moonless purple, were out in full force and shining their brightest. He allowed the horse to walk, and the sleigh creaked dolorously over the frozen snow. He would have been glad of company to save him from his thoughts — any other human being — and so when he saw in the pine woods ahead of him the figure of some one afoot he whipped up the horse. As he drew nearer, he was surprised enough to find that it was a woman. Not only that, but she was burdened with some heavy bundle which she carried under a shawl hugged close to her shoulder.

“Can’t I give ye a lift?” he called as he drew up beside her.

At his approach she had staggered back from the



road, as though both weak and frightened. He saw that she was a stranger.

"Jump in," he said. "It's a cold night to walk."

She started towards him as though to accept his invitation, but half-way there slumped to the ground. In a second he was at her side. A sharp wail came from the bundle which she had dropped.

"Good Lord," he cried. "It's a kid."

Bending over the woman, he saw that she had fainted. He lifted her quickly into the sleigh and wrapped the robe around her. He picked up the child clumsily and placed it on his lap beneath his coat. At first he was inclined to turn back, but it was as near to his house as to any other, and so, whipping up the horse, he went on at a gallop. At the top of Hio Hill he knew by the darkened windows that his mother had already gone to bed. His own house, on the other hand, was alight with welcome. When he drove into the yard, the front door opened and Tommy came out.

"Give us a lift here," called Nat.

As the boy reached his side, Nat handed him the warm bundle.

"What is it?" asked Tommy.

"Get indoors with it soon's ye can," ordered Nat. "Don't drop it, on your life."

With the still unconscious woman in his arms he

followed after, and then sent Tommy back to call his mother and put up the horse. He sent the astonished Flint scurrying out to the kitchen after hot water. He removed the woman's shawl and with some difficulty her bonnet. Then he began vigorously to rub her numbed hands. She was not an old woman, perhaps thirty, and though by no means beautiful had a sober earnest face that was not unattractive. She wore her reddish brown hair in a sort of pompadour.

Under the stimulation of the heat and the rubbing, her eyes fluttered open. She blinked at her strange surroundings a second, and then suddenly sat upright with a cry for her baby.

"He's all right," Nat reassured her.

Picking up the youngster, he brought him to her arms. She hugged him as close to her breast as her weak arms would permit. Then for the first time she seemed to notice Nat. Whatever she saw in his face held her spellbound. Her gaze still riveted on him, she fell back limply.

"Can't ye swaller a mouthful of hot tea?" he asked, as Flint came hurrying in.

"You," she stammered. "Who are you?"

"Page my name is," he answered.

She drew the child closer. He assisted her to sit up and she swallowed a little of the tea, but it

did n't drive the cold out of her bones. She shivered like one with the palsy.

When Mrs. Page came in, Nat ordered his mother to undress the woman and put her to bed.

"She can have the front room. Cover her up with blankets 'cause I reckon she's half froze."

"Land sakes!" gasped Mrs. Page. "Who is she?"

"I don't know," answered Nat. "Get her to bed as quick as you can, and look after the kid. Likely's not he's hungry."

"But where —"

Nat placed his hand on his mother's shoulder.

"Ask your questions afterwards," he said.

He carried the stranger and her babe into the front room and placed them on the bed. Then, while his mother was busy with the two, he built up a fire in the air-tight stove. The woman remained silent, answering nothing to Mrs. Page's exclamations. She seemed conscious of nothing but the child, which she insisted upon keeping in her arms. When the latter began to wail, Mrs. Page sent Tommy over to the other house after milk, and he went on a run.

It was a half-hour later when the child, warm and full, went off to sleep and Mrs. Page came into the room where the two men and Tommy were waiting for her in front of the fire.

"Does she act sick?" asked Nat, as soon as his mother appeared at the door.

"I can't make out," answered Mrs. Page.

"Think I'd better go for the doc?"

"I would n't afore mornin'. Maybe she'll get some sleep and wake up all right. Now tell me where 'n the world you found her, Nat."

"'Side the road," he answered. "I saw her walkin' along some five miles back and asked her in. She got about half-way to the pung and she slumped. Now, if ye ask me a thousand questions, it's all I can tell ye."

"But where was she goin' a night like this with a child in her arms?" she queried, proceeding to ask the first of the thousand.

"Thet's so," nodded Flint. "Whar was she goin'?"

"Maybe she was lost," suggested Tommy.

"I reckon that's as good a guess as any," admitted Nat.

"Nonsense," answered Mrs. Page. "A woman with a four-weeks'-old child don't git lost — not round here. To me it looks very strange."

She glanced significantly at Nat, but whatever hint she wished to convey was lost on the latter, for he answered calmly:

"I guess she'll tell us when she gets round to it."

"Maybe she will and maybe she won't," declared Mrs. Page.

"Thet's what I say," put in Flint, "either she will or she won't."

"Then we'll have to let it go at that," said Nat. "An' now ye'd better get back to bed, mother. If we need ye, we'll call ye ag'in."

"An' leave that strange woman alone in the house," she exclaimed in horror.

"Exactly," nodded Nat, "an' we'll call ye if we need ye."

He rose and threw a shawl around his mother's shoulders.

"It may lead people to talk, Nat," she warned.

"Let 'em talk, then," he answered. "That ain't worth losin' sleep about."

She went unwillingly, but Nat escorted her back to the house and left her with the assurance that he would call her if anything developed. When he came back, he also sent Flint and Tommy off to bed.

"But ye ain't eat yer supper," protested the latter.

"That's all right, son. I'm not hungry. Trot along!"

He piled more wood on the fire and sat down before it. He himself was frankly curious as to what had brought the stranger out alone on this deserted country road, but his curiosity was bred of nothing

but sympathy. There was something in the mute plea of those half-conscious eyes that stirred him; and then the kid — it had cuddled so warmly and confidently down into his lap on the ride home. It was incomprehensible to him that any combination of circumstances could leave a mother and child so utterly deserted. It was a pretty child too — slightly underfed, but with wondering blue gray eyes and hair as light as thistle down. He had a curious feeling that he had seen it before somewhere.

He was roused by a call from the next room, and hurrying in, found the woman sitting up in bed. The baby was asleep on the pillow beside her.

“Water,” she murmured.

When he came back with it, she scarcely more than moistened her lips and then asked for a light. He brought in a small kerosene lamp, which he placed on the bureau where it would not shine in the infant’s eyes.

“How ye feelin’?” he inquired in a whisper, as he again approached the bed. Without replying she stared as intently at him as though she too were trying to recall some resemblance. In answer to her unspoken question he said:

“Seem’s though I’d seen either you or the kid somewhere.”

She fell back limply, murmuring something he

could n't catch. She was breathing with apparent difficulty.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I think I'd better get the doc."

She shook her head.

"I'll be all right — in a minute," she answered.

But it was several minutes before she could speak again, and in the meanwhile she kept her eyes fixed on him in a sort of fascinated wonder. Then she asked:

"D' yuh happen to know — 'Gene Page?"

"Know him?" answered Nat. "Yes, I know him," he added with a frown. "He's a brother of mine."

"Is he round here?"

He nodded. "What about him?"

"Nothin'," she wheezed. "Frien' of mine — knew him."

"He went to sea for awhile," nodded Nat.

"After that he — he hiked back here?"

"'Bout four months ago."

"I — I guess it's — where he belongs," she answered.

"Ye say ye know him?" Nat asked sharply, a flash of some inexplicable suspicion crossing his brain.

But she buried her face in the pillow, trying to

muffle a racking cough. He turned uneasily towards the door.

"I think I oughter get the doc," he ventured again.

"What's the use?" she answered weakly.

"Does your chest pain ye?" he demanded with a vivid recollection of what he had pulled through in the spring. She nodded, placing her hand to her throat.

"Here."

"Ye'd better not talk then. Want me to blow out the light?"

"No," she answered quickly. "Leave it be."

"I'll be in the next room if ye want anything," he assured her as he prepared to go.

She lifted her head.

"You've seen him — lately?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Yer brother?"

"Less than four hours ago. Ye want him?"

"Want him?"

In the midst of her pain a faint smile lighted her haggard face. Then a new mood seized her, and she bent over the child, kissing its hair in a frenzy of passion.

"I'll bring him along when I get the doc in the morning," he decided.



"No," she gasped. "I — Oh, I'm rattled, rattled clean through. P'r'aps I can go to sleep now."

"Try it," he advised.

When he resumed his seat before the open fire, he was puzzled by her speech. It was evident that either she knew 'Gene or knew about him. But after a few moments' thought he laid her excitement and incoherency to the fever and dismissed the matter. He grew drowsy and finally, sprawling his length on the floor, slept.

He was awakened by the sharp cry of the baby. It was daylight, but the sun had not been up long. He threw some wood on the still hot embers and went to the door of the stranger's room and listened. He heard her crooning in a hoarse whisper to the child and so ventured in. He was shocked by her appearance. In the merciless glare of the morning light every haggard line was revealed as well as the hectic flush of her cheeks and the fever in her eyes. And yet she managed to smile a welcome at him. The baby was wide awake and looking about hungrily.

"How ye feel?" he inquired.

"I ain't — doin' any — high kickin'," she answered.

"The kid's hungry, is n't he?"

She nodded.

"Want some milk?"

"Can yer warm up — 'bout half a pint?"

"In no time," he answered. "Don't ye want a bite to eat yourself?"

She shook her head.

It did n't take him long to build the kitchen fire and warm the milk, and while he was at it Tommy came in.

"Ye'd better harness up the old nag, son," said Nat. "I'm goin' for the doc soon 's the kid has his breakfast."

"Is she wuss?" asked Tommy anxiously.

"I dunno 's she 's worse," answered Nat. "She 's been bad 'nuff from the beginnin'. She 's tired and half starved an' got a cold. I reckon she 's been playin' in hard luck for some time, son."

"Maybe she gut turned out the way we did," suggested Tommy.

"I dunno. If I could find the man who done it, I'd go a long way jus' to have a talk with him. It 's bad enough to turn out a man, but a woman with a kid — honest, I don't b'lieve any one *could* do that."

"The Deacon could," declared Tommy.

"Not even the Deacon," Nat disagreed with a slow shake of his head. "Anyhow ye run 'long now. I'll be ready soon 's ye are."

He went back into the sick-room with the milk, and watched with some interest her efforts to make the child drink it without the aid of a nursing bottle. By an infinite amount of patience she succeeded, and was rewarded by seeing a genial smile of satisfaction warm up the little face. The child began to crow and play.

"That's a fine kid," Nat ventured. "What's his name?"

"'Gene," she answered.

"'Gene?" he asked quickly, his face clouding.

"Named for — frien' of mine," she added.

The child extended two tiny thin arms towards him.

"Well," he concluded, "I s'pose there's more 'n one 'Gene in the world. But it's kind o' tough to name a nice kid 'Gene."

"Yer said — yer brother's name was 'Gene?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Nothin' crooked 'bout him — is there?"

"He is n't in jail, if that's what ye mean," he answered.

He lifted the child from the bed, and the latter twined his arms about the thick neck with a low chuckle. A swift look of pain shot over the mother's face, while Nat blushed a deep crimson.

"Wants yer — to walk with him," she said.

He began to pace the room, while the mother, exhausted, watched him with fascinated interest. To her it was like a dream — a dream come true. How often she had seen this picture of the broad back supporting and the big arms encircling the little fellow! It had helped her through many an hour when her own weak back ached with the burden. Even now, illusion though it were, it made her forget the pain in her chest for a moment.

But the sound of Tommy's voice outside broke the spell. Nat crossed at once to the bed and placed the warm bundle by her side. She seized it eagerly and pressed it to her bosom.

"I'm goin' for the doc now," he said. "I'll bring 'Gene back if ye want."

"No," she answered quickly, "not yet."

She did n't wish 'Gene to see her in any such condition as this. She knew well how pitiably pale and worn she looked. She had been bad enough when she started, but these last two days had told terribly on her strength. When she saw 'Gene, she must be able to stand straight and look him fair in the eyes. She had sought him, not in any spirit of revenge, but in a spirit of friendship. If he wanted her back, she was ready to come back, but not as a burden; only as his wife and the mother of his child.

"No," she added, still conscious of the brother's

antagonism. "By an' by — when I gets better — maybe I'll look him up fer — old time's sake."

"All right," he nodded. "An' if ye want anything while I'm gone, call Tommy."

He was gone four hours. The doctor was away and he had to wait for him to come back. When the two men stamped in the door, Tommy met them with a frightened look in his eyes.

"Gee," he cried, "ye'd better hurry. She's wuss."

Nat led the way into the little room, where he found his mother by the bedside holding the child. The stranger was tossing half conscious in the throes of a fever. The doctor gave one glance at her and ordered Mrs. Page out of the room with the child.

"Throw up the windows," he ordered Nat as soon as the two had left. "Give her all the air you can."

He administered a big dose of whiskey, which he had some difficulty in forcing down the throat now fast closing up. The effect was immediate. It brought her back to consciousness for a minute. She beckoned Nat to her side.

"Better find out her name," whispered the doctor. "It may be too late in a minute."

As Nat bent over the frail form, he saw her hand groping for the child.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"The boy's in the next room. Don't worry 'bout him."

"If I go —"

At the expression in her eyes Nat felt a lump rise to his throat.

"I guess the kid'll be looked after — whatever happens," he assured her.

"D'yer mean — it?" she gasped.

"I give ye my word."

"Thank Gawd."

She began to choke, and the doctor took Nat's place and worked over her for a moment. When the fit had ceased, she seemed to want Nat again.

"If yer see 'Gene," she wheezed, "jus' say — S' long."

"Have n't ye any friends? Your name —"

"Ain't worth — mentioning," she answered.

"Jus' say S' long."

She did not speak again. For an hour or so she flickered on, but with no knowledge of anything. After a while there ceased to be even a flicker, and the two men stood facing her motionless form with the sense of being in the presence of something very

## CHAPTER XXX

### *"S' Long"*

**A**T three o'clock on Monday morning Nat picked up 'Gene on the road to camp and gave him a lift as far as Dutton's.

"'Gene," he began, "I've got a message for ye."

"Who from?" questioned 'Gene in surprise.

"I dunno her name," answered Nat. "She was a little woman with tired eyes and her hair done up high."

It was well for 'Gene that the dark hid his face. He turned ghastly white and hitched forward, ready to spring out and make a dash for it. He did not answer.

"Know her?" asked Nat.

"Where's she from?" asked 'Gene through dry lips.

"I dunno where she's from. I found her 'long-side the road Saturday night when I was comin' home."

"What — what'd she have to say?"

"Not much," answered Nat. "It was just this. Says she, 'If ye see 'Gene, tell him S' long.'"

"Then — she's gone?"

"Yes, she's gone."

"Where?"

"She's dead. Died at my house yesterday mornin'."

The blood rushed back to 'Gene's face. He breathed more easily. He was able to think.

"What did she send the message to me for?" he demanded.

"Said ye was a friend of hers."

'Gene moistened his lips.

"Prob'ly some one I met when ashore," he suggested. Then he waited to see what more Nat knew. The latter answered only:

"Likely."

Nat relapsed into silence. The vivid picture of the thin form lying in that front room under the sheet oppressed him. It was not until the silence assured 'Gene that this must be all his brother knew that he ventured to inquire further.

"She's up there — now?"

"Yes."

"Who's goneter bury her?"

"I am."

"Did n't she tell her name?"

"Said it did n't matter."

Had it not been for the relief and joy of the nar-



now escape. Gene might have felt really sorry. This was not such an end as he would have wished for Bella, but now that it was over — why, it was over. It lifted a heavy burden from his shoulders.

"Thought maybe you knew her name," said Nat.

"No," answered 'Gene. "I sort of remember such a person, but I don't recollect her name."

"Seems kind of hard to bury her without a name," mused Nat.

"That's so," agreed 'Gene.

"Reckon we'll just have to call her 'The Stranger,'" concluded Nat. "The funeral's Wednesday. Ye can come if ye want."

"Kind of s'pose I oughter."

"Jus' as ye please. Ye'll probably have your hands full in camp for a while."

"What d' ye mean?"

"Ye've got to work hard to live down last week."

"The best thing to do is to forget it," growled Gene.

"The men won't forget it till ye make them forget it."

"How?" questioned 'Gene.

"By knocking out every man son of them that larcas look cross-wise at ye. And where a week ago there was n't more'n one, now there's a dozen. It'll keep ye busy."

"Ye expect me to wade through the whole bunch?" demanded 'Gene hoarsely.

"Exactly."

"Good Gawd, what ye think I am?"

Nat turned his head to face the man.

"You 're the husband of Julie Moulton," he answered steadily.

"What if I am? That don't make me a fightin' wildcat."

"It ought to make ye a man. It's *got* to make ye a man. An' accordin' to your tell ye 'd rather fight than eat in your sailor days. I'll give ye all the time off ye need an' your wages'll run on just the same. Ye can take till spring if need be, but ye'll have to begin to-day. Ye'd made a good start, but it looks now like ye'd have to begin all over again."

"A man ain't to blame for what he does when he's drunk," whined 'Gene.

"He's twice over to blame," answered Nat. "If he can't drink and be a man, then he's got to make up for it when he's sober."

It was the thought of Bella dead that gave 'Gene courage for a second. She had always been in the background, a terrible weapon for vengeance if Nat should ever find her out. Now that her lips were sealed forever, he felt freer. He squared his shoulders.

"I've had enough of all this," he growled. "Ye have n't any right over me, an' I ain't goneter stand it no longer."

"D' ye mean that?" Nat asked quickly.

"Every word of it," answered 'Gene.

He freed his hands and turned, ready to spring at his brother's throat. The latter drew the horse to a standstill.

"Then," he said, "we might as well get out right here."

He threw off the buffalo robe and sprang to the ground. 'Gene followed, keeping himself, however, on the other side of the pung.

"You go your way an' I'll go mine," he said. "I ain't troublin' you none, and ye ain't any call to trouble me."

Nat led the horse to the side of the road. It was dark and cold. He tossed the robe over the horse's back and then pulled off his heavy overcoat. 'Gene in the meanwhile had started back in the direction of St. Croix. Nat called sharply:

"'Gene!"

The latter, already hidden, now broke into a run. He had n't gone a hundred yards before he heard Nat's footsteps behind him. Throwing off his coat, he increased his speed, but though fairly fleet of foot he could n't shake off the steady tread of his pur-

suer. He finally darted to the left and hid himself in the shadow of a large pine. Nat paused almost opposite him and listened. Then, after listening a moment, he spoke:

"Ye 're only wastin' time, 'Gene. If ye mean what ye said, ye'd better come out afore you're half frozen 'cause I'm goin' to stay here until daylight."

'Gene held his breath and listened. He heard his brother take a turn of a dozen steps up the road and then back again, slapping his arms across his chest to keep warm. He took a cautious step backward, but his foot came down upon a twig that snapped in the frosty air like a pistol-shot.

"I hear ye," Nat called coolly. "When you're ready, come out and make good or climb into the pung and we'll go on to camp."

Without his overcoat and unable even to move his arms without making a noise, 'Gene felt the sting of the night cold clear to his bones. Within ten minutes he was half frozen; within twenty he was so stiff he could hardly stand. But he knew the hopelessness of trying to meet the alternative. It was easier a dozen times over to meet every man in camp than to face Nat in fair fight. It was n't so much the man's strength he feared as the spirit back of that. Had he the strength of a giant, he could n't

have beaten down this other and he knew it. It would be like trying to fight his conscience embodied in bone and muscle. Though he choked in baffled rage, he was finally forced to speak.

"Will ye — ye keep yer hands off me if I come?" he chattered.

"If that's what ye want," answered Nat.

"D' ye swear?"

"I promise."

Like a whipped dog, 'Gene stole from his hiding-place and stepped into the road. Nat came to his side and for a moment stood over him.

"Lord," he choked, "what a coward ye are!"

"Ye promised," 'Gene reminded him.

"Come on," Nat called sharply.

He led him back to his coat and then back to the pung. Shivering with the cold, 'Gene climbed in and took his seat. They drove on without another word to the Dutton place, where Nat left the team. Then they had four miles to walk up the mountain-side. It was not until the lights of the camp showed through the trees that Nat spoke again. Then he said without comment:

"I'd leave Bartineau for the last, if I was ye."

They reached camp by the time it was light, and from that moment on Nat kept close to his brother, ready to see the slights which the latter would not

see. He put him to work with an axe in the midst of the men and took an axe himself. Within an hour Trumble, a lank and scrawny half-man, dared a remark that was like a slap in the face. Instantly Nat glanced at 'Gene and nodded. The latter, for a wonder, sprang like a loosed dog, all the stored venom of the morning in his heart.

"Take thet back," he growled.

But Trumbull had the camp behind him and only laughed.

"Wipe the Frenchman's spit off ye first," he returned.

In a frenzy that made him lose sight even of physical fear, 'Gene bore down on the fellow. It was over in a moment, for not even Bartineau could have stood before the fury of that assault. Every man within sight was left dazed. When 'Gene, white of face, turned towards them as though expecting a half-dozen more to come at him, he saw them instead pick up their axes and return to their work.

That very night Ladoux received the same treatment. The words were scarcely out his mouth before he was borne to the ground. It was like touching fire to powder. The men scowled but kept silence until 'Gene turned into his bunk. Then the low talk grew general on the strange phenomenon of a man

who could fight one day like a mountain cat and the next would slink off like a gray wolf.

"He took me when I was n't lookin'." Trumbull tried to explain. "I've got a five-dollar bill that says I can lick the man in fair fight."

"I'll go ye," said Nat from the rear of the room.

He came forward with a five-dollar bill in his hand and stood before Trumbull. The latter blinked at it in silence.

"There's a good deal of scrappin' been goin' on here and I don't like it," said Nat to the group. "But so long's it's begun I want to see it through. I don't ask any favors for 'Gene Page on account of his bein' my brother. He don't need any favors. But he's here workin' like the rest of ye, an' I won't say No if he or any the rest of ye stick up for your rights man-fashion. There's been a lot of loose talk floatin' round 'bout him, an' I don't blame him for kickin'. He would n't be a man if he did n't; he would n't be the husband of Julie Moulton if he did n't."

Trumbull drew back into the crowd.

Nat still held the bill in his hand.

"I'll back him ag'in any of ye — any time, any money," he concluded.

No one answered, and he went out of the door. But he turned once again.

"The bet stands open, gents, as long as the camp does."

The next day 'Gene remained unmolested by either look or spoken word.

Though matters had now reached a point where Nat needed every man and every minute for his work, he called 'Gene to one side about the middle of Wednesday forenoon.

"The funeral's to-day," he said.

'Gene held his breath. He had dreaded this day. He had an uncanny feeling that if he came anywhere near that dead body something would happen. He had heard of such things; of corpses rising in their shrouds to point an accusing finger, and he was superstitious enough to believe them. He had hoped against hope that Nat would go off by himself and leave him out of it. There lay a worse danger in refusing to go. In his present mood he felt that it would take but a trifle to start suspicion against him. He could not answer.

"Come along if ye want," continued Nat.

"All right," nodded 'Gene.

At the foot of the mountain Nat once again hired the Dutton rig, which brought them home at about one o'clock. Tommy and his father had spent all the day in making the house ready for the event. They had cleaned it from the front step to the back,



and in the living-room had arranged a solemn row of chairs in a semicircle. Mrs. Page had attended to the other details which had to do with the mute figure in the closed room. When the two men came in, she was at the other house with the child, dressing for the occasion.

"Where's the kid?" was the first question Nat asked of Tommy, whose well-slicked hair in itself looked ominous.

'Gene, who had paused before the empty chairs with a frightened glance around him, swung upon Nat.

"What kid?" he choked.

"Her kid," answered Nat.

'Gene cringed back against the wall, his breath coming short.

"What's the matter?" demanded Nat.

"Nothin'," gasped 'Gene. "It's — it's the chairs. Fun'ral's allers get me this way."

"Do ye want to see her?" asked Flint in a low voice, as he stole up on tiptoe.

"Not now," answered 'Gene, almost in a plea.

"She's as fine a lookin' corpse as ever I see," continued Flint, nodding towards the room. "I declare she looks that young and peaceful ye would n't know her as the same party what came in here Saturday night."

Nat nodded his approval.

"Ye told Fuller we wanted everything done right up chuck?"

"The very best," answered Flint, still speaking in a hoarse whisper. "It's oak, lined with pearl gray. Nickel-plated name plate. Fuller allowed the only thing missin' to make it a first-class job was a name to put onto it."

"I told him to write just 'A Stranger.'"

"He done it," answered Flint.

"An' ye got Gideon all right?"

"Be here at two o'clock, sharp."

"Good," said Nat. "I'll just run over to the other house now and change my clothes. Ye told the neighbors they could come if they wanted?"

"Even the Deacon," nodded Flint, "though I did say I only wished it was him we was tuckin' away."

"It's proper to ask 'em all, even if they don't come," said Nat.

He started out the door, and 'Gene pressed close at his heels. He would n't have stayed alone in that house for a thousand dollars, not even though he feared what was waiting for him in the other house almost as much. Bella had never told him anything about the kid, though now he saw in a flash a dozen pictures that should have served as hints. He re-

called how busy she had been at her mysterious sewing during the last month. He remembered the look in her eyes the morning he had left — a look which ever since had haunted him because of its unfathomable wistfulness. He recalled half-finished sentences and the rings under her eyes and the stoop of her shoulders, which seemed to be supporting some great but unseen burden. But even had he then divined the hidden meaning it would not have meant to him what now the actual arrival did. To a man the long months of preparation mean little. Not until the first thin cry pierces his consciousness does he become a participant. Then the wonder of it crashes down like an avalanche.

There was much of the paternal in 'Gene. He was fond of children, and both tender and sympathetic with them. As he approached the house at Nat's heels, his fear vanished and he walked eagerly. He found himself resenting Nat's assumption of authority over the child. It was he who should be leading the way. For a moment this new spirit made him feel his brother's superior. At the door he stepped forward and preceded him into the house. His feet had n't crossed the threshold before he heard a sharp cry, broken by his mother's voice.

"There, there, dearie! Sssh!"

Striding forward into the next room, he saw in the corner the old red crib in which he himself had been cradled. His mother was bending over it. Without turning, she called over her shoulder:

"I declare, Nat, it's enough to break a body's heart to hear the poor thing take on. I b'lieve he knows just what 's happened."

'Gene grasped the sill.

"It ain't Nat; it's me, mother," he answered.

She turned instantly.

"Goodness gracious, 'Gene, where *is* Nat?"

"Here I am," the latter answered.

He pushed past 'Gene and made his way to the cradle. As he bent over and patted the little body, two hands were stretched towards him.

"Look at that," exclaimed Mrs. Page. "The poor thing thinks you're his Daddy."

"He's, sure 'nuff, smilin'," grinned Nat, as pleased as though he had accomplished a miracle.

"Then you can tend him while I finish dressin'. But what in the world brings *you* home, 'Gene?"

The words made him feel very much of a stranger. His whole better nature resented the speech.

"Why should n't I come?" he demanded.

"To th' fun'ral?"

"Ain't I a right to?"

Nat lifted his head.

"She knew 'bout 'Gene," he explained briefly.

Then the fear returned to 'Gene, and his face went white.

"I met her somewhar an' thought it decent to come 'long."

"Why, so it is," answered Mrs. Page. "It's a pity ye don't know her name."

"I don't see what diff'rence that makes."

He was looking hungrily towards the crib. Nat's broad back shut out every inch of it. He could have flung a chair at the man.

"Well," concluded Mrs. Page, as she hurried out, "I'll try to find a black tie for ye."

He was left in the room feeling like an intruder. He stepped forward resolutely towards the crib with his heart in his mouth. Over Nat's shoulder he caught sight of the tiny thing. For the fraction of a second he had a vision of light downy hair, of blue gray eyes, of the dimples in his cheeks as he smiled back at Nat. There was a look there he recognized — an expression he had seen in Bella's face when she was at her best. He responded with an impulsive movement, as though he meant to take the child from the cradle, but the latter caught sight of his unfamiliar face and expressed fear in a sharp wail. Nat turned as fiercely as though 'Gene had done harm to the boy.

“Get out of here,” he commanded. “Don’t ye see you ’re scarin’ him?”

’Gene recoiled, with his fists doubled up. Once again he felt for a second as though, if matters could come to blows then and there, he could master this man. Then, as his brother rose, he faltered back towards the door, weak and trembling as a man with the fever. In the hall he shot a sharp look over his shoulder, as though fearing Bella might step out of the shadows. He skulked on into the sitting-room, and sinking into a chair remained with his head bowed in his hands until just before two his mother came in with a frayed black tie. He put this on mechanically, and followed the little group into the other house. Nat carried the baby in his arms, Mr. and Mrs. Page followed, and ’Gene brought up in the rear like a dog slinking behind a buggy.

When they entered, Fuller, the undertaker, met them and ushered them to seats before the oaken coffin. It was open, but ’Gene kept his eyes shut. He did n’t dare to look. A few moments later the Rev. Elisha Gideon arrived, and still ’Gene kept his eyes closed. His hands were as cold as ice; his forehead was damp. He had n’t seen Gideon since the day he had stood before him with Julie in the parlor of the parsonage. And now the man who had made him the wife of one woman began the funeral

services of this order. He made a brief prayer, read a selection from the Bible, and then opening a hymn-book ~~written~~ a hymn. Without accompaniment he sang the first verse by himself. On the second Flint joined in, followed by Mrs. Page, and finally, as well as they could, by Nat and Tommy. After this he delivered a brief sermon based on the parable of the one lost lamb. He spoke from his heart, for the story of the stranger as told him by Flint had genuinely moved him. He grew eloquent, and soon the little group was weeping.

But 'Gene felt as though some one had him by the throat. He choked and gasped for breath, as the man went on, tortured to his soul. For the first time he realized fully the horror and brutality of what he had done. He too would have wept, had he been able, but the tears stuck half-way until he was in an agony of physical pain.

He heard a final brief prayer:

"O Lord God, Jehovah, we now give over this stranger into thy care in all trust and confidence. We who know little of her save that she sunk under some great burden too heavy for her, consign her to you, who know all. And we beseech your loving care for her and for the little babe she has left behind. Lord God, who art ever kind to strangers and the lone, we ask this in thy name. Amen."

There was a muffled shuffling of feet as the mourners arose. 'Gene too rose. They filed solemnly and slowly about the wooden box and glanced in. He followed blindly, with his eyes tight closed. Then all moved out to the teams, followed by the sound made by the dull thump of the undertaker's hammer as he shut out forever from human sight all that remained on earth of the stranger.

The ride to the cemetery and the brief service at the grave was an eternity of torture for the man. When it was over, he turned away by himself and hurried down the road on foot. He looked back once and saw Nat handing the child over to his mother as she seated herself in the sleigh.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### *A Little Child*

WITH only one half his timber piled up on the river-bank and with two-thirds of his time gone, Nat found himself facing a crisis involving a possible load of debt that would burden him for years. There was just one way of meeting the notes coming due in the spring, and that was by getting to market sufficient lumber to cover them. He had been unfortunate from the start; much of the pine was more inaccessible than he had figured, the roads had been harder to make and keep clear, for not in ten years had so much snow fallen; and finally both men and horses had suffered from minor accidents which had laid them up from two days to a week at a time. He had at present his full quota of men; to hire more would be added expense enough to absorb his profits. He had figured closely — too closely, it seemed. But when he had undertaken the contract, it was in a spirit that made all things possible. He had made the agreement after that week in the home of Julie Moulton and under the inspiration of

her black eyes. At that moment nothing on earth could balk him of his desires. He could not at that time either see or grasp the meaning of failure in any enterprise tending towards her happiness. For her sake he had wished to make money and conduct a business of his own. He had taken the first opportunity which had offered itself. Had the inspiration remained, he would have succeeded; but it was a different matter with her gone from the partnership. He cared too little about his own personal fortunes to exert himself to the fullest. And his men, catching this mood had toiled in merely a perfunctory way.

On the Wednesday afternoon of the funeral Nat had driven back to his own house with the baby in his arms. By that instinct which affords the young their sole protection, the child clung to him even in the face of the gentle coaxing of Mrs. Page. Whether it was the feel of his strong arms, the sympathy in his blue eyes, or something deeper and more mystical, only a seer or a poet could answer, but 'Gene, Jr., managed to make his partiality so obvious as to be at first rather confusing to the man.

"Land sakes," exclaimed Mrs. Page when, as they stepped from the sleigh, the youngster refused to leave Nat's arms, "I guess you've put your foot in it now."

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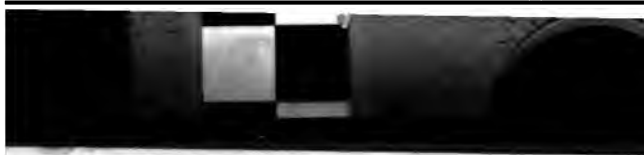
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"You don't mean that, mother?" he said.



"It's certain that at my age I can't bring up another family — leastways a stranger's family," she returned.

"No one's asked ye to, has there?" he answered aggressively.

"Then who do you think —"

"I reckon we can look after the kid right where he is," he interrupted.

"Be you mad?"

"I reckon two men and a boy is enough to look after a feller who is n't knee high to a grasshopper."

The kid in question grinned his approval.

"We ain't goin' to bother no one," continued Nat. "I reckon long's there's wood on Eagle we can keep him warm, and long's there's a cow in the State of Maine we can keep him fed. The kid was brought here, and here he stays until some one shows a better right to him than I've got."

"Well, of all the fool notions ever I heern tell of, that's the foolishhest," exclaimed Mrs. Page. "Do you think for one minute I'd leave that poor lone infant here alone with a couple fool men?"

"Thet's just what ye're goin' to do," answered Nat uncompromisingly.

"To say nothin' of lettin' you kill the precious lambkin, don't you know you'd have the whole neighborhood talkin' about you?"

Nat rose to his feet. He stood flat-footed and square-shouldered before his mother.

"This kid is goin' to stay here," he said. "But here's one thing I'm goin' to do; if there's a law in the land that will let me, I'm goin' to change his name. An' if there ain't no law that'll let me, I'm goin' to change it just the same."

"What's the trouble with his name?" she demanded.

"I don't like it," he answered.

Mrs. Page did n't let the matter rest there, but though she talked at him until the moment he left the next morning, her words had no perceptible effect upon him.

"He's stubborn's a mule about it," she informed her husband. "So I s'pose the best thing I can do is to see they don't stuff the precious dear to death."

The new interest sent Nat back to camp with fresh zeal. It gave him some objective, some goal outside himself, upon which to spend his energy. He had hoped to find this in his handling of 'Gene, but though he now had no intention of relaxing his efforts in this direction, he had learned that they did nothing but add fuel to his love for Julie. If he had hoped at first that his motive was unselfish, he had since learned that it was not. He sought her happiness, but his own was so involved with hers

that in the end it became his. 'Gene was a mere instrument. He would have struck down 'Gene as quickly as he would lift him up, had he thought the former course would have made for her greater contentment. He had found himself taking less and less interest in the man himself, growing more and more impersonal towards him. And as this worked out, he found himself doing whatever he did for her sake alone. For the meanwhile his love for her grew with the task, and having nothing upon which to feed, fed upon himself, burning him hollow.

So, until now, he had lived through each week with no other joy in prospect than the walk back to St. Croix on Saturday. The sight of the house in which she lived was all the reward he asked in return for six days of hard work. That was n't much for a man to live for; it was n't much to make a man work for. But it was all he had left in life until this new interest turned up. He used to rise early on Saturday morning with his lips dry in a fever of anticipation, for on that day he allowed his thoughts to run riot. With 'Gene by his side, with 'Gene moving ever nearer to her, he felt he could do this safely. There seemed nothing disloyal in this because he offset it by bringing her man home to her. For the license of those few hours he paid in full and paid bravely, and when it was over he cleared his brain of her as

well as he was able until the next week. But while he was fighting the snow and the heavy miles of road, he lived over every minute of her that was fairly his, up to the moment that Foley had met him on the road and given him the news. There was not much even then — the night on the mountain top, the week when he had lain sick in her house, and a half-dozen moments after that — but always the memory of those things left him saner and steadier.

When on the morning after the funeral he strode into camp, it was n't an hour before the crew noticed a change in him. In the first snappy decisive half-dozen orders they knew that a master mind had grasped the loose end of the tangle of work with a steady hand. Instead of taking an axe and joining them merely as another workman, distinguished only by the almost inhuman amount of physical work of which he was capable, he became in reality the boss which until now he had been only in name. He stood among the cutters and outlined a campaign that doubled their work; he followed the teams down the road and straightened out obstacles that had hectorated their progress from the first snow-fall; he was here, there, and everywhere, with a clear eye and a quiet voice, which in a week organized the crew into a smooth-running machine of double its former power.

There was a change, too, in 'Gene — an even more significant change. He had left the snow-covered cemetery that afternoon with the picture of Nat and the child the most significant feature of the whole tragedy. Stumbling off by himself, he had made his way back to St. Croix in a jealous rage that overshadowed every other episode in his life. Not even his first passion for Julie approached it in intensity. This new emotion was both deeper and cleaner. It sprang from the best in him. He spoke scarcely a half-dozen words to his wife the evening he unexpectedly appeared, and rose in the morning and stole out for camp with the house still asleep. In the meanwhile he had matured a plan that in itself promised better things for him. The child was his, blood of his blood, bone of his bone. The realization of this went to the core of him, and roused him as nothing before had ever been able to do. The child was his by every right, and on the climb up Eagle that cold morning he made up his mind that the child should in reality be his. This determination did not come in a mad frenzy, but in the cool afterthought of that frenzy. He knew what it involved — nothing short of that physical conquering of Nat which until this moment had appeared an utter impossibility. He could n't defeat him for the sake of Julie, but for the sake of the



But — *Good Lord!* the next summer was in the end to witness to be done in a day or a week. Even by the end of the winter it might be possible. He felt his muscles swell and his chest expand at the very thought. He valued him the more since that morning a new man.

Most of the crew were as keen to note a change in him as in Nat. They let him alone even to the point of keeping aloof from him. So for a month he swung his arm from morning to night undisturbed, and because life now had some sound meaning for him he slept better at night and ate better and from day to day grew stronger and hardier. He knew this because on the walks back home he found himself able to keep pace with Nat, and because every Sunday in the privacy of the big barn he tested his strength.

And in the house on the crest of Hio Hill the little child who was the cause of all these changes grew apace and cooed contentedly in his new surroundings.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### *Julie Pays a Visit*

JULIE heard the report of the new arrival at the Page house and heard the inevitable gossip which spread in connection with it. To the first she listened with excited admiration for the man, but she tried not to hear the other tales. She knew, what the others did not know, that Nat Page needed no other motive than the inspiration of his big kindly heart to do what he had done. When she heard that he had legally adopted the child and given it his name, she replied indignantly to the further insinuations which followed. And finally, as the rumors continued to grow still more vicious and she learned that the house on the crest of the hill, which for the first week or two had been the center of many curious guests, was now being shunned, she determined upon an even more radical course to prove her confidence in the man.

“Father,” she said one Wednesday morning, “I want you to drive me over to Hio to-day.”

“What for?” he asked in mild surprise.



eagerness with which he had cared for it all the fall, his disappointment at her refusal to go to the auction with him. It had been, of course, absurd for him to expect her to go. Anyone else but Nat would have realized the impropriety. In this, as in everything else, he was to blame for his own willfulness, and yet though she saw this clearly enough, she had never been fully able to make herself feel his blame. She could put the facts into words and defend them with sound argument, but this was all, even as the wife of another man, that she had been able to do. When all was said and done, this was n't much when the mere thought of entering the doors confused and excited her, bringing her heart to her throat and the blood to her cheeks.

More than once she had envied both Tommy and his father their sex, which allowed them the privilege of this asylum. Had she been a boy, she too would have applied there, for of late 'Gene had destroyed to her utterly the meaning of home even by the side of her father and mother. For them also he had destroyed the meaning of home. Merely his right to come had done that, even though he availed himself of it only two days in seven. It turned the place into a public inn. It was as though the world at large had the privilege of invading the sanctity and seclusion of this roof, for 'Gene was to-day as

most of his summer there as when he had his usual tea conversation with his friends. There was fewer words now but his accustomed meaning had never been on the part of every one. There was no more happy certainty.

Mrs. Mather was to spend the day with a neighbour and arrived there not to return until the following afternoon when the weather was fair.

"Perhaps you can help Mrs. Page with some sewing for the child," she told her daughter as parting. "I'm sure it must be pretty hard for her."

"I'll see," answered Julie with a nod.

It was six months ago that she had ridden over this same road with Nat by her side where now her father sat. To her it seemed six years ago except for the vividness with which she found herself remembering the details of that uncomfortable three hours. Much had gone from her since that time — much that would never again be hers.

It was a very sober world that confronted her now — a world with no spring and containing little of brave adventure. She no longer thrilled with the magic of the sheer golden-blue day-sky; with the mystic call of the star-pricked night-sky. Birds, flowers, music — all the gladsome things of a light heart had vanished. Morning after morning she awoke to find her sky a sober gray. So it remained

all day until at night it changed to an inky black. And there was no longer any brave land over the horizon line. Rio de Janeiro was only a name, a name at which she shuddered.

She reached the foot of Hio Hill and passed the little red schoolhouse with only a pang in her heart, but from that point on her thoughts took a new turn, and she began to look forward with some excitement to what lay ahead of her. When she came within sight of the house on the crest, she saw smoke curling from the chimney, and this was like an extended hand of welcome to her.

She stepped from the sleigh here, while Silas went on to the other house to put up his horse. She found herself at the door with her breath coming short. She stood there for a moment before knocking, and gazed across the deep white valley below and to Eagle Mountain beyond. In the clear winter air the latter looked very near. She felt as though a man with strong eyes might be able to see her from its summit. She shrank back and timidly knocked. Tommy answered the door and gave a glad shout of surprise at sight of her.

"Gee, Miss Moulton, have you come back?" he cried.

"Only for a visit, Tommy," she answered.

But the boy's words haunted her. She felt almost

as though she had come back, as though she had returned from some dreary, long journey.

"Are n't yer comin' in?" he asked, as she still stood on the threshold in something of a daze.

"I — I came over to see the baby," she explained.

"The kid? Ye're just in time. He's just woke up."

"Is Mrs. Page with him?"

"Naw. Dad an' me's mindin' him. Come on."

She entered the door, and he led the way to the big room. She recognized all the furnishings. They were just as he had talked them over with her. In the living-room stood even the big clock with the parrot painted upon it. Flint was before the fire, sprawled out on the floor in front of a little bundle of white clothes. She motioned Tommy to remain silent and for a moment watched the picture. She did n't see the child's face at first, but when finally the little thing turned in her direction she gave a start. The resemblance to Nat was even more marked than it had been described to her. As she saw the light hair, the blue eyes, and the thin mouth, she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. More even than the facial resemblance there was something else, something deeper, that left room for scarcely a reasonable doubt. She was clutched by an impulse to turn and run from



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the house, but at that moment the child  
sight of her and greeted her with a smile, a  
that filled her with infinite pity. She  
crossed to Flint's side and knelt before the v

"Poor little thing!" she called.

"Ain't nothin' poor 'bout him," Flint co  
her, with some feeling.

"I — I did n't mean that he did n't have  
to eat," apologized Julie. "But it seems s  
for him to be left alone."

"Alone? Who's alone?" Flint bristle  
"Ain't he gut Tommy and me? Ain't he gut  
Julie glanced uneasily over her shoulder.

"Of course he is n't at home?" she asked.

"I bet he wishes he was," answered Flint.  
can't git him outer the house from Saturday  
till Monday mornin'."

She sat down by the side of Flint and to  
child in her arms.

"His name is Nat," Flint informed her.

"He is n't old enough for a name," l  
Julie.

"It's a good thing to have a name," said  
"*She* would have been better off if she'  
one."

Julie shuddered.

"Right thar in that room she died," exp



Flint with a nod towards the corner. "It was mighty hard for her to leave the kid."

The chubby hands were fumbling about Julie's neck. The touch of them sent a warm thrill through her.

"The pity of it," answered Julie.

"Right," answered Flint. "An' the luck of it for the man who left her. I'd hate to be him and run foul of Nat."

The girl met Flint's eyes for a second. There was no vestige of suspicion there. She felt ashamed of herself. It was almost like accusing this child in arms of wrong to accuse Nat. And after all, what did it greatly matter? The point was that here was a new being who had come into the world by whatever means dependent upon the trust and kindness of those who had been here much longer. She placed the child on the rug and rose with an air of authority.

"I've come over to see if there is n't anything I can do to help you with him," she announced.

"With Nat?"

"With this Nat," she replied, stooping to kiss the child.

"Do we need any help, Tommy?" inquired Flint.

"What for?" demanded Tommy.

"Now look here — you two," broke in Julie.

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"You don't think you can bring up this c  
by yourselves, do you?"

"I reckon," nodded Flint; "Nat and us.

"Well, you can't," she assured them.  
where are his clothes?"

"Mrs. Page does those," said Tommy.

"Well, I'm going to help her from now  
sides, you don't want to be piggy about tl  
do you?"

Flint bristled up.

"We don't want no charity, neither."

"Charity?" laughed Julie. "Do you th  
one would call it charity to have the chance  
for such a dear little mite as — as Nat?"

"Did n't know," answered Flint. "Bu  
don't mean it that way I'll show ye where  
his things."

He led the way to an old high-boy, one of  
chases at the Lovell auction. She remembe  
Nat had spoken to her of this and asked h  
would be useful in the new home. She had  
to answer him, but he had added:

"I'll get it anyhow. It will come in ha  
your things."

Dear, stubborn Nat! He should n't hav  
as he did or acted as he did, but the sigh  
beautiful old piece of mahogany brought t

to her eyes. She felt as familiar with it as though it had come out of her own room. Queer how much like home this whole house seemed!

Flint pulled open one of the drawers and stood back with the air of a satisfied showman. Well he might, for the outfit that stood revealed was worthy of a young prince. Julie stared at the delicate linen in astonishment.

"You don't mean to say Mrs. Page made all those things?" she demanded.

"She does n't do nothin' but iron them," answered Flint.

"Then where —"

But Flint interrupted her by opening a second drawer. This also was filled.

"Well?" she demanded.

"He bought 'em."

"But where in the world —"

"Boston. Sent for 'em."

"Told 'em to send along fifty dollars' worth of kid's clothing," Tommy further explained.

Julie scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry, but she felt decidedly like doing one of the two. She turned away with an exclamation of pitiful regret.

"Then there's nothing for me to do!"

Flint glanced at the Grandfather's clock and then

back at the girl. He hesitated a moment, studying her with grave deliberation before reaching his decision. Then, apparently satisfied by what he read in her eyes, he said:

"Maybe now he would n't care if we let you feed him once, eh, Tommy? It's most time."

"I reckon he would n't care for once," Tommy backed him up.

"You're very, very good," laughed Julie with a little break in her voice. "But you're sure he would n't mind?"

"Not for once," Tommy assured her.

Then Julie stood by and watched a most solemn and impressive ceremony. Flint, with Tommy by his side to watch every move, went down cellar and brought up a bottle of milk. With the air of chemists measuring to the fraction of drams, they poured into a second bottle exactly ten ounces of milk. Tommy then went into the kitchen and returned with a dipper of boiling-hot water. They placed the second bottle in this, and watched the result as though expecting a spectacular reaction. At the end of five minutes there was another council of war as to whether the proper temperature had been reached. In this Nat, Jr., joined with very decided opinions that it was all right.

"Taste of it, Tommy," advised Flint.

Tommy touched the milk to his lips.

"A leetle longer," Tommy determined, at which announcement Nat, Jr., entered a protest in no uncertain language. Julie swooped down upon him and held him to her breast.

"There, there, dearie," she cooed. "You shall have it in a minute. It's a shame for them to tantalize you so."

She walked the floor with him until all was ready, and then was allowed the great honor of presenting his majesty with the bottle, while Flint and Tommy stood each side of her to make sure she did it properly. As a matter of fact, however, Nat, Jr., proved himself perfectly capable of managing the subsequent proceedings without either advice or assistance from any of them. In the midst of it Mrs. Page and Mr. Moulton entered, and joined the admiring group with as much interest as though even to them the process were a new miracle of nature.

Mrs. Page greeted Julie affectionately, but more as a welcome friend than a daughter-in-law. She had never been able to grasp the fact of 'Gene's marriage. It had come to her as such a surprise, and she had seen so little either of the girl or her son since then, that she accepted it more as a well-founded report than an established fact.

"I'm glad to see you over here, Julie," she said, as though the latter's presence were a cause for some surprise.

"I knew the child had your care or I'd have come before," answered Julie.

"My care?" returned Mrs. Page. "Lord sakes, it's as much as ever Tommy will let me in the door."

Tommy looked away guiltily. Flint spoke up.

"Nat says visitors is perfectly welcome."

"Visitors?" snorted Mrs. Page. "Hear that? He makes out his own mother to be a visitor. And 't ain't as though the child was his own, either."

"Perhaps that's the reason for it," answered Julie uneasily.

"There ain't no reason for it," declared Mrs. Page. "I s'pose you've heard all the stories goin' round?"

"Yes," admitted Julie.

"The people who started them ought to be put in jail," growled Moulton.

"Then you'd have to put the whole neighborhood in jail," answered Mrs. Page. "But I s'pose you have to expect sech things when a man makes sech a fool over a young un as Nat has made of this one."

The boy having finished his meal, Mrs. Page

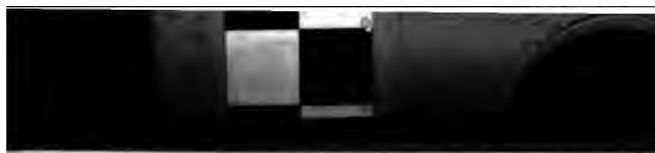
grabbed him from Julie's arms and proceeded to make about as big a fool over him with her senseless nothings as it was well possible for any one to do.

At dinner-time Mrs. Page insisted upon all, including Nat, Jr., going over to the other house. Then, at the end of the long afternoon and before the boy went to bed, she further insisted that Julie and her father spend the night with her.

"Perhaps Flint will let you put the young un to bed," she added as a further inducement. "Anyhow he 'll let you look on."

Julie was glad to stay. She was finding the first relaxation in months here. And so it happened that at five o'clock she and Flint and Tommy returned to the house on the crest of the hill, while Mr. Moulton remained behind to talk with Mr. Page, and Mrs. Page busied herself about supper.

This was how it happened that, when a half-hour later a sandy-haired broad-shouldered man, his cheeks stung crimson by the cold after his long walk from the top of Eagle Mountain, tiptoed to the sitting-room after a warning from Tommy, he saw this picture: the room dark save for the glow of embers in the hearth; before this hearth the figure of a young and very fair girl; in her arms a child. It is small wonder that he caught at the panels; small



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wonder that when he heard the croon of her voice singing the old French chansons she used to sing on the doorstep that the picture grew misty and he had to clutch his throat to keep back the cry that rose from the depths of his aching heart.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### *The Cry of a Hungry Heart*

LIKE a man watching a vision, Nat stood by the door in dumb amazement, hardly daring to believe his eyes. A hundred times sitting alone in this room he had dreamed this dream; a hundred times he had seen her sitting just as she was sitting now with a child in her arms. But always she had been a silent figure. He had never heard her voice. And now — the wonderful melody of it to him who had not heard it for six long months. It was this which made her now a glorious reality.

His hungry eyes feasted upon every strand of her hair as though each were a separate and individual Julie. It lay massed in rich folds upon the top of her head, and at the temples and in the gentle nap of her neck escaped in tiny silken tendrils. He followed every line of her profile, every curve of her neck, every rounded line of her body with breathless eagerness. He made no attempt to check his passion. For the moment he gave himself up utterly. If at any time during the last few months he thought he had fought a good fight and won, he now realized the

mockery of his supposed victory. Never had he felt the sheer intoxication of love as now; he had never as now realized the power and grip of that passion. He might as well have tried to check single-handed the onrush of a broken log jam as his present emotions. The girl was part of his very soul, part of his very being. He would have had to lie to every instinct in him to have denied this. He was able to connect her with no past save his own; with no present, no future, save that. The present picture told him what should be. If circumstances had altered that decree, then they were basely wrong. Here she was and here she belonged, and the child in her arms should have been their child.

Trembling and dizzy, he watched her; with dry lips and an aching heart he watched her; with a joy that was almost pain he watched her. She was rocking back and forth, with her head bent over the child. Though the lad had long since gone to sleep, she still sang on in a low monotone. She raised her head and with her eyes on the crimson embers continued her song. Her face grew infinitely tender, infinitely wistful. It was a mother's face Nat saw then as she sang on, not to the child in her arms, but to her own dream children. And those dream children were his dream children. They were the same who had watched him at his building, who had

watched him in the dawn of those glorious purple mornings, who had played about the barren sills when his building was done. They were the same who had tried to comfort him when he had sat in this dark room alone. To them she was crooning; to them who had moaned because they were motherless. It was a black lie that she belonged to anyone else.

She rose with the child in her arms, and still singing tiptoed into the dark of the bedroom. After she had disappeared, Nat still heard her voice, and even without seeing was able to follow her movements as she tucked the little fellow into his crib. Then there was a pause as though she were praying there. Then she stole out, pausing on the sill a moment to make sure the boy was asleep. He heard her sigh as she came on across the room uncertainly with her eyes still in that dream country. Reaching the chair before the fire, she hesitated and then sank down in it. Her head dropped and she covered her face with her hands.

Nat strode to her side. She raised her head and stared up at him. In one long unfettered gaze he met her eyes and then fell upon one knee in front of her.

"God forgive me, Julie," he choked. "But it's true now, as it's always been."

She neither moved nor spoke. Right or wrong, wife or not, no woman could resent the honest, whole-souled confession expressed in that cry. The sight of him there with bowed head, his big frame shaken in his terrible struggle for control, gave her courage. She knew that in the end he would win — that he would be strong. Though his very presence sent the blood racing through her veins like a mill stream, she knew no fear either for him or for herself. She placed her hand upon his head for a moment, and smoothed his tangled hair as though he were another child. But through that touch she felt his kisses course from her burning finger-tips to the crown of her head. Hot though they were, they were as clean and brave as the winds that blew off Eagle; hot though they were, they were as sacred as this room hallowed by the babe fresh from the fountain spring of love. They were the kisses of the May wind upon the pink lips of the drowsing Mayflowers. They were the kisses of the spring rain upon the swelling tree buds. Once again, as on the mountain top, he took her back, through them, to primal joys. She stood again in a world belonging to him and to her alone — a sweet spring world big with promises that quickened the inner heart of her.

As she removed her hand, he raised his head. She

closed her eyes. She dared not let him see into them just now. It seemed as though these eyes took little account of the proprieties. They were as lawless as her own heart. They refused to obey her brain, holding themselves accountable to her heart. And her heart — her heart was at times a wild braggart of truthfulness.

Gently pushing him away from her, she made her feet.

"I must go. You must let me go now," she said.

She heard her own voice as though it were some other speaking.

"I've let you go until I'm half dead for need of you," he cried, springing to her side. "I can't never let you go again. I —"

But even as his strength was her strength, so his weakness was her strength also.

"Nat," she said quietly, "I don't think you know what you're saying."

In shame, his extended arms fell to his side. She moved on towards the door, when she was checked by a cry from the next room. It was a queer little cry, like the whimper of a blind kitten seeking its mother.

"He wants ye," said Nat. "The boy wants ye."

Again the restless cry was repeated.

"He's feelin' round in the dark for ye," whispered Nat.

"Not for me," she answered pitifully.

"For you," nodded Nat. "He's missin' you."

He knew how the others had missed her — those who played around the barren sill.

"But I can't stay," she said in terror. "You must go in to him."

"I'll go," he said quickly. "But ye'll wait and see? I know how he'll feel when he — he can't find ye."

"Go to him," she commanded.

He obeyed. She heard him trying in vain to comfort the child. The crying brought both Tommy and his father to the door.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed the former excitedly.

She was ashamed to answer, and with her finger to her lips motioned them both back. Then she crossed the room and went in to the side of the crib. The little hands were pawing restlessly about, refusing the comfort of the big hands so eager for them. But when the little fingers felt her fingers, the crying ceased instantly. Repeating her crooning song, she drew the clothes snugly about the small chin and stood on there for a moment. Opposite her, in the dark, stood Nat. He neither spoke nor moved, but

she felt as though his big arms were about her and his lips whispering hot words of love to her.

When she came out of the room, she hurried at once to find Tommy, but Nat still pleaded with her.

"Stay just a moment," he called.

"I must n't," she answered firmly.

"I've waited a long while to see ye, Julie."

"But you need n't have," she replied weakly.

"You've always been welcome at our house."

"It would n't have been you I'd have seen there, Julie," he cried.

He placed a chair before the fire for her and another for himself the other side of the hearth. He stood behind the latter as though to reassure her.

"I want to see ye sittin' here — just once," he pleaded. "There is n't nothin' wrong in that, is there?"

She seated herself, though it was against her best judgment, and for a moment or so he did not speak but just gave himself up to the illusion. But this could n't last. Leaning forward, he asked her abruptly a question:

"Julie — are ye happy?"

She started. She moved uneasily, clasping and unclasping her hands in her lap.

"I — I don't think you have any right to ask me that," she answered.

"Ye mean — ye mean ye don't want me to ask?"

"Yes."

"But he's good to ye. Is n't he good to ye?"

"Nat," she cried sharply, as she half rose, "I can't let you question me like this."

"Why not?" he asked simply.

He rose heavily to his feet and at sight of him towering above her she shrank back weakly.

"It is n't right," she answered.

"Maybe it is n't," he choked, "and maybe it is n't right for me to talk to you, but I've held in long's I can. I can't lie to myself any more an' I can't lie to you. I want to tell ye that somehow he — he don't make any difference. I've gone on day an' night all this winter lovin' ye more an' more. I've tried every way I could to stop it; I've worked myself numb an' I've lied to myself an' it's just the same. It's Gawd's truth he don't make any difference."

"Nat," she cried, "he does and he must. Don't you understand? He's my husband. 'Gene's my husband."

She said this as much to steady herself as to steady Nat. She said it over and over again to herself, while he talked on:

"Julie, if it's all straight, why can't I see straight? Why can't I stop lovin' ye?"



With his brows together he leaned over her as though pleading for an answer.

"Why don't he make a difference?" he repeated.

She was asking that of herself. The question seemed to pierce her very soul. With her heart pounding in her throat, with her head grown dizzy, she sought an answer.

"Julie, Julie," he called hoarsely.

She felt herself tottering as on the edge of some great height. Then she flung her arm over her treacherous eyes and backed away from him.

"He's my husband. 'Gene's my husband," she called wildly.

She stumbled on towards the door, and he watched her, understanding nothing but the plea of the up-raised arm as though she were defending herself from an expected blow. He followed to her side.

"Gawd forgive me," he cried. "I've hurt ye. I've hurt ye again."

He led the way to the front door and swung it open for her, bowing his head as she passed out.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Then he added fiercely:

"But if it's a thousand years, I'll wait for ye."

Once outside, Julie turned and ran. Back to the Page house she ran — wildly and with a great joy in her heart.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### *The Drive*

THE picture of Julie sitting by the fire with the lad in her arms — that was what he took back to camp with him on Thursday morning. He hugged it close, making himself forget all else. It was this which put new life into him and gave him courage to face, with confidence and clear vision, the problem of the timber still unhewn. It was something to dream about at night; something to bring a man out of bed at dawn with the zest of a pioneer. And this it was which put new life into the whole camp.

Even 'Gene seemed to catch the contagion. He worked as hard as the best of them, with a tireless energy that once again won for him the respect of the men. He grew serious and held himself aloof from the rest of the crew. At night he no longer told stories of adventure, but sat by himself and turned into his bunk early. Every Saturday he hurried back to St. Croix alone, no longer waiting for instructions. All this relieved

Nat of a strain and gave him more time for his work.

With April Nat began to see the end of his labors. In the twilight of one fair day when the snow was heavy with the warmth of the sun, Father Laramie came into camp. It was his custom to visit his children at about the time the ice began to crack on river and lake, knowing that they would soon be out of his hands on the dangerous drive and later in the greater danger of the city which lies at the end of the drive. He was as sure a harbinger of spring as the Mayflowers. Nat saw him come toiling up the tote road and hurried out to meet him, respectfully removing his cap and grasping in his calloused paw the thin white hand of the priest.

"Welcome, father," he exclaimed heartily.

The priest studied the ruddy smiling face with some curiosity.

"All is well with you?" he asked.

"Could n't be finer," answered Nat. "We'll be ready for open water in a week."

"Good. You look better than when I saw you last."

"You have heard about my boy?"

"Ah, that was a fine thing for you. I want to see the lad."

"He's gained two pounds," Nat confided.

"Wonderful," exclaimed the priest. "But you — you have gained ten."

"So?"

"And your eyes look better. You were in some trouble when I came before. That has gone?"

Nat flushed.

"Some of it," he answered slowly.

"The young get over such things quickly, but you — I was a little afraid it would take longer."

"If you mean I've got over lovin', you're wrong," answered Nat.

"How?"

"I've just begun."

"But Julie Moulton — I had not heard she was a widow."

"She is n't," answered Nat.

The good priest looked at him anxiously.

"Then —"

"I had a talk with her."

"Tut, tut," answered Father Laramie. "I do not like the sound of that, my son."

"I told her I loved her; that 'Gene did n't make any difference."

"And she let you tell her that?"

"Because she could n't help it and I told her because *I* could n't help it."

"... .."

"That's all."

"It is not well for young wives to hear such talk," answered Father Laramie sadly.

"It's done," said Nat, "and it makes it easier to wait."

"For what?" demanded the priest sternly.

Nat was startled by the question. He had never asked himself that. It did n't seem to matter. His brows came together in a perplexed frown and his face grew sober.

"I wish you had n't asked me," he answered slowly.

"My son," said Father Laramie, "it is for us to ask just such questions, for in those questions, the questions a man does not ask himself, sometimes lies the sin."

"Sin?" cried Nat.

"The sin," continued the priest. "It will not do for you to wait. The sin is as great as though you did not wait."

At the pain in the big man's face, Father Laramie placed his hand firmly on his arm.

"C'est grande dommage, but you understand?"

When the priest saw the stubborn jaws lock together, he knew the man did not understand.

"D'ye think a man can talk himself into not lovin' when he does love?" exclaimed Nat.

"He can talk himself into not hoping when there is no hope," answered the priest quietly. "So you will keep your love pure."

Father Laramie was a very wise old man. He knew when to stop talking as well as when to begin. Taking Nat's arm, he started on towards the camp.

"I must see that boy of yours," he said. "After the drive I will come."

It was well for Nat Page that the ice broke up early that spring, for he needed this work. And it came, as it always comes, with the fierce onslaught of the swollen waters themselves. From the first moment the logs were rolled into the frenzied icy current the battle was on. The contest was easier than it sometimes is, for he had plenty of water and had the upper stream to himself, but even with those advantages the task was the task of a man.

Take a tortuous forty-foot stream which has been for centuries eating its rugged path along the base of a mountain and suddenly swell this to five times its normal size; into this frothing turmoil dump some five thousand twenty-foot logs, and then for fifty miles try to keep them moving straight on. That was the task. Spill a box of jackstraws into the gutter after a spring rain and you'll see what the drive looks like. But each individual log is further endowed with the power of a catapult. It is a

drunken giant of strength. It is a rudderless, crewless battering ram moving always full steam ahead. Each is a writhing, crushing demon of destruction.

To guide these five thousand demons in some sort of orderly fashion, Nat Page chose ten men from his crew, among them 'Gene; ten men armed only with peavey sticks; ten men who together could not have lifted from the ground a single one of these logs lying passive. And yet they attacked them when they were a writhing mass with a thousand horse power back of them, and made as light of it as though this were some new sport. With sure step they leaped from one rolling slippery log to another, taking in at a glance the stubborn ones and prodding them on with unerring instinct. A single misstep and the logs would close over the unlucky man, forcing him beneath the waters and battering his head if he struggled through an opening. It was a wild chaotic game these men played with a jest on their lips and Bangor ahead of them.

Through three days they played the game from dawn to sunset without mishap, for neither bruises nor duckings in the icy waters counted — nothing short of a maiming injury or death being worth more than a laugh or an oath at most. Then one night an impish log managed to get itself wedged against a rock in midstream in such a position as to

check those behind. In an instant a hundred more rushed in to tighten the wedge, and in another hour the pile rose thirty feet high and barricaded the stream. Behind this the mighty waters flooded back to increase their power, but though they boiled through the tangle and pressed hard, nothing stirred. The mightier the force back of the jam, the more firmly it was locked.

When the daylight came, Nat Page grasped a peavey stick and asked for a man. 'Gene was the nearest and stepped forward. For a second the two looked into each other's eyes as they had not done for several months. Each knew that the work before him meant a gamble with death — the odds even. It was as though each accepted it in the hope that here at last death might straighten out the tangle of their lives. This was possible by eliminating one or by eliminating both, but it was on the first chance that 'Gene was acting and his brother knew it. Because of this Nat for the first time in his life looked upon him as a man.

Nat leaped upon the nearest log, and 'Gene followed. Balancing themselves with the heavy sticks, springing like cats from position to position, they were both soon in midstream at the base of the treacherous pile of logs. Facing each other, they pried about for the key log, and the danger of this



is comparable to nothing except toying with an avalanche.

So they worked for five minutes, while the waters swirled at their feet and the pile above them groaned and creaked. So they worked without looking to the right or left of them or at each other. Together they drove their spikes into a final log which looked no different from the others, but which from this impact alone caused the whole mass to shiver.

"Ready," shouted Nat.

With their shoulders to the task they gave one mighty heave and then sprang. Slowly, uncertainly, the logs bore down upon them as they scrambled for the shore still side by side. Side by side, with not an inch to favor either, they reached the half-way mark out of danger of the tearing, grinding avalanche of timber. But here, startled by the roar behind him, 'Gene turned his head the fraction of a second. It cost him his balance, and he slipped, clutched wildly at the logs and was swept on down stream. Nat saw him fall, and turning hurled his body to the right in time to grasp the man's hair. So together they swirled on in the maddening maelstrom of timber and boiling waters. But Nat with his free arm outstretched hugged a pine log to his side, while he shouted his orders to 'Gene.

"Let yourself go — with the current."

'Gene struggled to raise his head higher above the stinging waters. He was panic-stricken, frenzied, and yet mad as he was one idea stood out clearly in his mind; this other must go down with him. He must not die alone. In the flashing white foam he saw the drawn features of a dozen Bellas; in the roaring waters he heard her mirthless laugh. Twice he tried to turn to get his arms around his brother's neck. Twice the latter warned. Once more he tried, but this time 'Gene received no warning. He felt a blow that seemed to lift his head from his body and knew no more.

When 'Gene recovered consciousness, he was lying wrapped in blankets on the bank beside a small fire. He rose stiffly to his elbow and looked about. He was quite alone. At his feet the stream swept on, still bearing a few straggling logs. He shuddered as he saw it and remembered. With a splitting head he sat up. He saw his clothes hung up before the fire. He crawled towards them and, finding them almost dry, put them on. Then he stumbled on along the bank in search of the rest of the crew. He found them a mile or more down stream at their work, with Nat at their head. The latter looked none the worse for the episode. It was nothing more than an episode. It might happen again a dozen times before the end of the drive. 'Gene seized a

peavey stick, and through the rest of the day toiled as best he could, neither hearing comment nor making comment on what had passed. The next morning he was quite himself again.

So five days went by, and on the sixth they came to deeper and less troublesome waters. Then the talk of the men changed from the usual discussion of minor camp episodes to what was waiting for them behind the swinging doors and behind the shaded windows; then the men grew restless and slept uneasily at night. So too 'Gene grew restless, though he did no talking and though his thoughts were not of Bangor.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### *The Miracle*

WITH the last straggling log safe within the boom and the boom safely moored alongside the mill above Old Town, Nat hurried off to Bangor one morning, and came back with the money which had been deposited there by Judge Morrison as an advance to enable him to pay off his men. As each received his winter's wages and stuffed it into his trousers' pockets, it was as though the hardships of the winter had never been. For the moment each man was a millionaire and Bangor only a short ride away. There was much song and jest and horseplay as the little group gathered in a knot and half sheepishly sidled off towards the railroad station. Bartineau alone hung back by the side of Nat and 'Gene. For one thing, he did not like the look in the eyes of 'Gene Page. They were too narrow, and they followed the movements of his brother too closely.

The three were standing on the river-bank when Nat counted out three hundred dollars in bills and handed them over to 'Gene. He did this with ap-

parent reluctance and with an expression in his eyes that betokened anxiety. 'Gene accepted the money and started off, when Nat spoke. The latter turned sharply, his shoulders squared, and faced his brother. It was as though he had been expecting this.

"I reckon ye'd better wait for me," said Nat. "We'll catch the afternoon train home."

Bartineau moved closer, because he saw 'Gene's arms stiffen and saw his fists clench. The man drew a long deep breath and made his answer:

"I reckon I'll do as I damned please, Nat."

Even Bartineau realized that the man who uttered these words was not the same man who had slunk away from before his fists. There was no bravado in the speech.

"Ye mean —" began Nat.

"That I'm through with you," 'Gene broke in.

Instead of backing away as was his custom even when he made a brave speech, he stepped nearer.

"You're ready to fight?" demanded Nat.

"If ye want to fight," answered 'Gene.

Nat glanced towards the big sawmill which had already begun to sing its way through the fallen logs. He saw a half-dozen men moving about.

"Good," he answered. "Let's go back here a ways — out of sight. Ye'll come along, Pierre?"

"If he wants to fight — sacré, he owes me a fight too," growled Pierre.

"I've been waiting for this six months," answered Nat. "Ye'll do nothing but see that the fight is fair."

The three moved on across the sawdust waste and on into a group of pines which hid them from sight. Nat led the way, 'Gene followed, and Bartineau brought up in the rear. Bartineau looked rather solemn. He began to sense the fact that this was to be no ordinary fight. It looked serious to him — too serious.

Once in the shelter of the pines, 'Gene threw off his coat. He did this eagerly, like a man who has been long waiting. He loosened the collar at his throat and rolled his sleeves to the elbow. Bartineau glanced at his arms. They were good arms, extraordinarily good arms. Tense as they now were, the muscles showed up to advantage. The last three months with an axe had counted for something. Pound for pound the two men were about of a weight. Inch for inch their backs and chests would have measured the same. It would have been difficult to match two men more evenly as far as beef and brawn go. And yet Bartineau had seen lesser men whip this 'Gene. He had done it himself, but then there had been a difference. When he had

fought, he had watched his eyes and had seen them grow afraid even before the fighting began. He studied them anxiously now for some return of that shifty back glance, but, much as he hated to admit it, he saw nothing of that. 'Gene stood straight and looked straight, and his breath came softly and not in gasps through his tight lips. It was a miracle he could not understand.

"Nat," said 'Gene in a voice as hard as black ice, "the Frenchman is goneter keep out o' this?"

Nat nodded. As he did so, 'Gene rushed.

Now a fight between big men with naked fists is not a boxing match. There are no breathing spaces and no rules. It is a battle—a bloody, gruesome elemental struggle. It is not pretty to watch and impossible to describe. Bartineau sitting on his haunches grew pale and breathless. Back of every blow struck by either there were two hundred pounds of madman; back of every rush there was the naked lust for destruction. Within five minutes both men were bruised and battered and blood-stained. It seemed impossible that this should last, but minute after minute it did last. There was no parrying, no guarding, no side-stepping—nothing but give and take, with something akin to murder in every blow. Even when the two began to stagger, there was no sign of stopping.

“Sacré Dieu,” exclaimed Bartineau. “You ’d better quit.”

No one heard his cry. In the near-by trees the spring birds whistled and chirped, and overhead a chipmunk scolded. The sun sifted through the green branches upon both men.

And still, to Pierre Bartineau the miracle was that this yellow dog of a 'Gene, this man upon whom he had spat, this liar and coward and beater of horses, fought on without moan or whimper. With his face cut open, with his breath spent, he fought on, returning from each blow that staggered him, to hit back as hard as he could. And he could hit hard — that was another miracle. Even now, when the fight had lasted ten minutes, there was nothing to choose between the two. It was difficult for Bartineau to believe that in all the world there lived another man as powerful as Nat Page, and yet he was forced to admit that here there was just such another. But where had he found his strength, this yellow dog of a man?

Where the naked fists struck, either they bruised deep or cut deep. It was a sickening sight to watch, enough to turn a man's stomach forever against fighting. Had the two been armed with knives, bent upon hacking each other to pieces, it could not have been worse. And yet, too, there was something awe-



some about it—like a great storm at sea or a Northern blizzard.

Once again they came together, landing blow for blow, each tottering back at the end. But this time Nat was the first to recover, and tumbling forward he struck again. Lifting his weak arm, 'Gene tried another blow only to feel his legs crumble beneath him. Still he neither shielded his head nor asked for mercy. He rose upon his hands and feet; he tottered up, when again his legs played him false and he fell. He had reached the farthest possible limits of his endurance. Within arm's length of him Nat threw himself upon the ground panting for breath. So for a moment the two lay, their hot eyes upon each other.

Pierre Bartineau stood over them both.

"This is enough," he trembled. "Nom de Dieu, this is enough."

Before the words were out of his mouth, 'Gene made a final desperate attempt to reach his brother. Because his legs refused to obey his will, and because of baffled rage and baffled hopes, he began to curse—brokenly and to himself. The sight was pitiful.

"You fought like a man," exclaimed Pierre, the words springing to his lips unconsciously.

Then Nat looked up at Pierre.



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“This,” he said, “this is the husband of Julie Moulton.”

But the man on the ground knew better. From the beginning of the fight he had not thought of Julie Moulton. He was not thinking of her now. The thing that had made him fight was the memory of another man bending over the cradle where it was his own right to be; it was the memory of two tiny small arms clinging to the neck of another when they should have been clinging to his own; it was the heart hunger of a man for his own. That was

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### *Quits*

NAT PAGE sent Bartineau back to his sister on the first train. Then he engaged rooms at Old Town for himself and his brother because neither of them was presentable. For a week both men lived in seclusion with their own thoughts.

It was not a pleasant week for either man. From dawn till dark Nat paced his room with the words of Father Laramie ringing in his ears. The sin lies in hoping, the good priest had said, and though at the time the words had stung they did not bite into his soul as they now did. In the first place he had had many other matters on his mind until now, and in the second place he had not then been dealing with the same man who now lay in the room next to his. He was cruelly honest with himself, and admitted that though in the end he had pummeled his brother to the earth it was the latter who had won the victory and not himself. 'Gene had stood in his tracks and fought for all there was in him, sinking to the earth at the end without a cry, without a whimper, and

that was all that any man could do. 'Gene had fought for all there was in him — that was what had counted. It did not matter if that was much or little so long as it was all. It wiped out whatever had gone before. A man need prove himself a man but once to challenge the world forever after.

This then was what Julie had seen in 'Gene at the beginning; this was what she saw now. This was what had called forth her love; this was what retained it. Where he had been blind, where others had been blind, she had pierced the veil of 'Gene's superficial weaknesses to the bold heart of the man. The man who had slinked into camp that morning in the early fall was all that he and others had seen; the man who had faced him in the spring was the man she had seen. It was as clear as daylight to him, but, like daylight flashing upon a man long blind, it confused him. In the first ache of it he would rather have remained blind.

But though Nat writhed under the truth, though the admission of it left his future black as hell, he did not attempt to avoid it. He was his own Father Laramie without the good father's gentleness. He was brutal with himself, as brutal as ever he had been with 'Gene.

He had, then, no further right to hope. He held fast to that fact. Julie belonged to 'Gene, to the

man who had stood in his tracks and fought for all there was in him. By the law of man and by the law of might, she was now his alone.

He himself then had no further business with 'Gene. From this moment on he must not thrust himself into 'Gene's life. This meant that he must leave his home, must go somewhere and start again. He would leave the house on the crest of the hill to Tommy and his father, take the boy, and go somewhere else. The boy! Here was his one ray of hope in a future black as night. With him to strive for, the world still held out some promise. Always at the moment when the tension became so strained as to seem upon the point of breaking he came back to the boy. It was through him that he must begin his life once more and live his life. He had not seen him now for three weeks, and on the sixth day of this last week he found himself so homesick that he could wait no longer.

In the meanwhile the man on the other side of the wall had sat most of the days and half the nights by the side of the window with his head bowed and his hands clasped loosely before him. He was waiting — for what he did not know, for what he did not care. Broken, humbled, confused, he was more dead than alive. Of Julie Moulton he thought nothing. She was as completely out of his life as though she

had never been. Had she walked in upon him here, he would have done no more than glance up and then away. In the bitter ache of the greater thing he had lost, she counted for nothing.

And it was a big thing he had lost — the best thing in him, the only thing in him. From the moment he had first seen the child this inspiration had been born, this clean passion of fatherhood. It had been like a morning wind sweeping through a room heavy with the stale debauchery of the night before. So his heart had been freshened to make a place for this one pure guest. The night after the funeral he had known that he must seek life through this child and had begun his task the next morning. He had striven his best — God knows how hard he had striven. The man had dreamed, actually dreamed, decent, sane, unselfish dreams. These had brought him sleep at night which gave him further strength. The last few months had been the biggest and happiest of his life.

And now the dreams were gone. He had lost. He had lost forever. He knew it. Never again would he be so strong as he was on the morning he had faced his brother. It was n't possible for him ever again to feel so strong physically or so confident. When he had begun to fight and up to the moment his legs had crumbled beneath him he had

been as sure of accomplishing his purpose as it is possible for a man to be. And he had lost. Even after that he had lost. With the blue eyes of his own son, flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, spurring him to his best, he had lost. Good Lord, he had lost! He felt like shrieking this to God himself in a defiant challenge for an explanation. But, after all, what did it matter now? For the first few days he moaned this fact to himself. Now he didn't even do that. With head bowed he listened while the words were tolled into his dull brain.

So when on the sixth morning Nat walked in upon him, 'Gene felt no interest in what the latter might say. He looked up dully and waited. He heard Nat speaking to him, his voice coming from a great distance:

"'Gene, I'm going back home now."

He did not answer.

"I'm going back home," repeated Nat. "Why don't ye come along with me?"

This was not a command; it was merely a suggestion.

"What for?" asked 'Gene.

"I expect they'll be missin' ye by now."

"Who?" asked 'Gene.

"Why — all your folks. It's three weeks since

'Gene looked up at his brother, then out the window, then back at the floor.

"We'll catch the first train, and that'll get ye to St. Croix this afternoon. What d'ye say?"

"All right," answered 'Gene indifferently.

As the man rose to his feet, Nat stepped forward with his hand outstretched.

"It's quits with us, 'Gene," he said. "I want to tell ye straight that I have n't given ye credit for what there is in ye. I guess no man has a right to judge another nohow. After this we go our two ways. And if it'll help ye any, I'll tell ye I'm going to clear out."

"Clear out?" questioned 'Gene with a flicker of returning hope.

"I'm going to quit Hio. I'll take the boy and start somewhere else."

"Where?" demanded 'Gene, his eyes growing narrow.

"I dunno. I don't care. It don't make much difference where."

"You're going to take the kid?"

"Ye did n't think I'd leave *him*, did ye?"

'Gene's eyes grew dull again.

"No," he answered, "I s'pose not."

"Ye don't know what that boy's come to mean to me, 'Gene. He's all I've got now. I guess it's



him that's made me see straighter. Queer what a grip the little devils get on ye!"

'Gene put on his hat and coat. He was ready, as ready as he would ever be. He followed at Nat's heels like a small boy. The latter settled the hotel bill and led the way to the station. Silently 'Gene followed him into the train and took a seat by his side.

It was not until the train drew into Bangor that there was any change in him. Then the noise and the bustle and the sight of many other people roused him. He felt an insane desire to get away from himself. While alone in his room, this had n't seemed possible. He had felt caged, imprisoned within himself. He glanced furtively at Nat, but the latter was too deep in his own thoughts to notice.

At the station they found that the train to St. Croix would not leave for two hours.

"Let's go down town," suggested Nat. "I want to get something to take home to the kid."

With the blood in his face, his eyes burning as though with fever, 'Gene followed. They went into a toy-store and there Nat bought an armful of dolls and tiny carts and gayly colored balls. 'Gene watched him in a daze. It was he who by rights should have been buying those things. He saw as in a vision those chubby hands reaching out

to grasp the toys, and his throat grew tight and hot.

From there they went into a clothing store, and here Nat bought recklessly. The salesman had only to show him a cap or a pair of tiny shoes or a dress in order to make a sale. Nat laughed as he bought, and without asking the price reached down into his pocket and brought out bills by the handful.

'Gene fumbled at the bills in his own pocket. They burned his fingers. He sought the door for air. Then he stepped out upon the sidewalk, and before he knew it found himself carried on by the crowd. He quickened his pace. Once beyond the direct influence of his brother, 'Gene felt as in a panic. He did n't know where he was going; he did n't care. He wanted to get away from the memory of those dolls and dainty caps; he wanted to get away from the memory of everything. He turned down a side street, and as he did so he saw a man bolt through a pair of swinging green doors. He found himself before a bar.

"Whiskey," he ordered.

The hot liquid burned his throat as he poured it down, but he liked it. He drank another glass and then another. It sent the blood to his brain and quickened his thoughts. In another few minutes it had made a man of him again. Once again he felt

the old power in his arms; once again he dreamed his old dreams. He had thought that never could he face Nat again, and now — why he could batter down a dozen men his size. An inspiration seized him; he would find Nat and beat him where he found him. He would take the train back to Hio and seize the child. It was his child. He had a right to his own. He would take the kid off to Boston. He could get a job there. He must find this man.

He strutted out of the bar-room to the street. There was nothing to show the liquor in him. He walked steadily and was dizzily clear-headed. He hardly felt the walk beneath his feet. The noise and the colors of the passers-by came to him as from a distance. So he wandered aimlessly up one street and down another, peering into the face of every man he met. He wondered why they grinned back at him. This didn't irritate him, but it seemed queer.

Then he met a woman. She had passed him twice and had followed him for a block or more. She was a pathetic, wan creature, trying hard to preserve a youth which was fast fading before her own eyes. Her bonnet was too young for her cheeks, her ribbons too young for her eyes, her dress too young for her body. As 'Gene paused at a corner,

she brushed by him and then turned to laugh. At first it had been a forced laugh, but as she caught a fair look at his handsome ruddy face, handsome though scarred in several places, her eyes so brightened that the laugh sounded genuine.

"Did you speak?" she asked.

The first effect of the liquor after his long walk had by now left him. He was no longer possessed by his original idea, but he was still in a genial mood.

"I dunno," he answered good-naturedly. "What's your name?"

"Marie," she replied. "Seems though I'd met you somewhere."

"P'r'aps now ye did," he admitted. "My name's 'Gene. Where ye goin'?"

"Nowhere partic'lar."

She turned her eyes modestly towards her feet. They were trim little feet—quite the trimmest feature about her.

"I'm feelin' kind of lonesome."

"I'm a stranger myself," he confessed.

She became bolder.

"If you want to come along, I know where we can find something to cheer us up."

"Lead the way," he invited.

"Follow behind," she instructed. "Pretend you don't know me."

She tripped ahead of him, and he followed. They turned this way and that until finally she brought up before a block of houses. She hurried up a flight of steps and opening a door held it for him to pass in. In another minute he found himself in a tawdrily furnished room and sank down in a comfortable easy-chair. She placed two glasses on a small table before him and proceeded to fill them with whiskey.

"Here's how?" she said, lifting her own.

"How," he nodded.

So the pitiful tragedy began. As the girl listened to his loosened tongue, she forgot the treacherous part she had been assigned to play. He talked marvelously of adventures at sea, of daring exploits in foreign ports, of hairbreadth escapes in the jungle. His imagination had never been more nimble. It flushed his cheeks and brightened his eyes and gave a brave poise to his shoulders. It made him a very handsome figure of a man.

Then his talk suddenly shifted. She was wearing a pin bearing on its face the photograph of a child. His eye caught it.

"Yourn?" he asked.

She covered the picture with her hand and shrank away from him. He did not notice this, but ran on about his own.

"I've got a boy," he said. "I'm on my way back to him now."

For a moment the path lay clear before him. Nat did not figure as an obstacle at all. 'Gene voiced here before this woman every dream he had dreamed this winter. His voice grew gentle and tender as he rambled on about the youngster and the great things he was going to do with him. He relished the opportunity to put these fancies into words, to hear his own voice expressing them.

When he reached again for more whiskey, he saw the girl in tears. Her hand was upon the bottle before him. She was leaning over the table.

"See here," she called. "Get out o' here. Get back to your kid with your money."

"Let's drink to the kid," he suggested.

But she swept the bottle to the floor and rose to her feet.

"Listen," she called earnestly. "Get out of here now. You've had enough, and in a minute it'll be too late."

With startled eyes she faced the door. It was already too late. The door opened, and a man, thick-shouldered, evil-eyed, entered. At sight of 'Gene he leaped forward in mock rage. It was the old, old game; 'Gene must pay big to the irate husband to escape the consequences of this compro-

mising position. 'Gene listened to the man's tirade without understanding more than that the fellow wanted his three hundred dollars. He sought the girl, who had crowded herself into a corner of the room, her hands over her face.

"We were only drinkin' together. She 'll tell ye," he faltered.

"She will, will she? I know what I've seen, don't I? Hand over what ye have or you can tell your story to the police."

There was too much liquor in 'Gene's brain to let him think clearly. But the girl had lowered her hands. She shook her head at him. He saw again the pin on her breast. He remembered then what she had told him to do with that money. She was right. He must get it back to the boy. It was the boy's money. Once more the old strength returned to his arms and he flung himself forward upon the man. The latter sank to the floor, but at this point the door opened and two others entered. The girl screamed a warning to 'Gene, and he made his feet. Then he fought the three and bore them back out of the door and into the hall. So he would have beaten his way into the street had it not been for the knife. Some one produced it and struck three times. As he fell, the outside door opened and he was

thrust out upon the sidewalk. Then one of the thugs fumbled for his pockets, but it was Marie who frightened him off.

"Mon Dieu," she cried. "He is the only man among you. Let him alone."

When 'Gene recovered consciousness, he was lying on a narrow white bed in the hospital. An officer was bending over him as though watching for just this flicker of returning life.

"What's your name?" he asked hurriedly.

"'Gene Page."

"Home?"

"St. Croix."

"Anything ye want to say afore —"

"The money's for the boy," answered 'Gene Page.

Then something happened inside of him and he writhed a moment, and that was the end of his life.



## CHAPTER XXXVII

### *The End of It All*

WHEN Nat Page looked around and found his brother missing, he was not greatly disturbed. He understood how little interest 'Gene must take in an expedition of this sort, and concluded that tiring of it he had made his way back to the station alone. He himself continued down the street, still looking for more things to purchase. He gave up only when he could find nothing which seemed even remotely suitable for a baby. Yet he was by no means satisfied. He had a pocket full of bills left that he wanted to spend for the sheer joy of spending it on the lad. He passed a millinery store filled with pretty ribbons and laces for women. He paused here, for a second finding a new temptation. These trifles would do for Julie. That bit of ribbon would look well in her hair, that collar seemed made for her neck. Then there were dainty handkerchiefs that matched her own daintiness. In fact, every exquisite thing in the store looked as though it had been made for her and her

alone. He had almost entered when he forced himself back, with his jaws hard set. He had no right to buy for her. That pleasure was for 'Gene alone. He glared down the street in search of the man. With his winter's pay in his pocket, 'Gene ought to go home laden with gifts for his wife. Queer 'Gene had n't thought of doing this when they had started out together! He felt again the old domineering instinct; felt again personally responsible for 'Gene's thoughtlessness. Then he remembered all that he had worked out during this last week and went on about his own business. Perhaps, after all, this was just what 'Gene was now doing. Perhaps he had gone off to buy presents for Julie.

Nat came back to the station, but when the train for St. Croix pulled in his brother was still nowhere to be seen. For a moment he hesitated and then reluctantly resolved to wait over for him. 'Gene, in the excitement of shopping for Julie, might have lost track of the time. He piled up his bundles on a seat in the waiting-room and went out for a bite to eat. When he came from the dining-room he bought one of the extras which the newsboys were shouting up and down the station. It seemed that some one had been murdered. As he glanced carelessly at the head lines, a name leaped out at him like a tongue of flame. It scorched his eyes for a

moment so that he could not read on. He blinked at the people around him, as though expecting them to rush forward with an explanation. No one moved; no one cared. And yet 'Gene was dead! But ghastly as this crude fact in itself was, it was n't 'Gene's white face that flashed before him now; it was Julie's. He saw her pale but steady, big-eyed but firm-lipped. He saw the agony reflected in her big dumb eyes. 'Gene was dead, but the greater tragedy was that 'Gene was dead to her. He had pictured her glad welcome to 'Gene, and now some one must go back and tell her that he would not come — that 'Gene never would come again. The man who had fought so hard for her was dead.

He forced himself back to the paper and staggered through the rest of the story. He had been confounded by the climax of the tragedy, but as he read the details he was dazed. He could n't understand this. 'Gene had been lured into the apartments of a woman who was a stranger to him. She had confessed that it was all a cold-blooded conspiracy to rob the lumberman, but nevertheless 'Gene in the first place had followed her. That was the shameful, brutal heart of the matter. On his way home to Julie, 'Gene had followed another! In the end he had fought hard to escape, it had taken

three of them and a knife to kill him, but what of the beginning?

For one moment Nat saw red, and the next he felt like slinking out of sight. If 'Gene had died in this way a year ago, it would have been no more than he expected; if six months ago it had happened, he would not have been greatly surprised. But coming after 'Gene had the love of Julie to strengthen him, coming after this love really had strengthened him and made a man of him, why, it seemed like some hideous accident for which the boy was not responsible.

So he stood for a moment trying to force into the noisome tragedy some decent explanation, always with the eyes of Julie before him pleading, pleading, pleading. Then he saw quite clearly that explanations did n't matter. They must n't matter. He must go farther back than this end. The 'Gene he must restore to Julie was the 'Gene who had stood in front of him on the sun-lighted pine knoll and had fought until his legs crumbled beneath him. The 'Gene he must bring back to Julie must be the 'Gene she had made her husband. He had done his best to find this man for her in the living 'Gene and had succeeded. His faith, based on the evidence of his own eyes, was not yet entirely shaken. He had seen the man fight as only a man can fight who loves

and has the right to love. That was what had beaten him — 'Gene's right to love. It had beaten him in the end, though 'Gene had fallen at his feet. This victim of murderers was some other man, and yet even he had done his best towards the end. He must have been fighting for something besides himself to ward off four of them and save his money. 'Gene would n't have done that for himself alone or for the money alone.

'Gene had been murdered while defending his money and had fought well. That was all Julie must know. He would get 'Gene back ahead of the gossip, ahead of the papers.

He made his way out of the station, forgetting the toys and little dresses he had left in the waiting-room, and stood on the curb staring blankly at the street. He did n't know how to go about what he had to do, but even out here Julie seemed to wait expectantly. A cabby came up.

"The City Hospital," Nat ordered.

At the hospital they were glad to see him in order to make the identification of the man complete. A ward tender escorted him down the long corridors and into an outer building of brick. He fitted a key into a cast-iron door, swung it open, and stepped into a cold cell-like room. There on a granite slab Nat saw a sheeted figure. It struck a chill to his

heart. He turned aside as the orderly snapped back the covering.

"Here he is," the man called to him sharply, in a hurry to get away.

Nat turned and looked. He saw his brother's face. There was no trace of horror in it, nothing uncanny about it. It was as though the man were asleep. It was the face of a very young 'Gene, the face of the boy 'Gene. Nat stepped nearer. He caught his breath; it was even the face of the little child at home. It was unbelievable, but as he stared on the conviction grew. The forehead was the same; the eyes, closed as in sleep, the same; the mouth and chin and shape of the head the same. The mouth was graced with what seemed almost like a gentle smile, the smile of one sleeping with pleasant dreams. So the boy often slept.

"That the man?" demanded the ward tender.

"Yes," answered Nat. "That's 'Gene."

"Then there's an officer wants to see you," the ward tender answered, as he flicked the sheet back over the silent form.

Nat followed the man to the office. Officer Sunderland was there.

"Any one round here to identify you?" he asked in a businesslike voice.

"There's the first National Bank," answered Nat.

The two went over there, and, this formality over, the officer drew from his pocket a sealed envelope containing three hundred dollars.

"He said this was for the boy. They was his dying words," confided Officer Sunderland.

Nat seized the officer's arm in a grip that made the latter wince.

"You sure of that?" demanded Nat.

"Sure? Was n't I bending right over him? 'The money's for the boy,' he said, kind of smiling. The boy meaning his kid, I take it. Anything queer 'bout that?"

Nat passed his hand over his forehead.

"No," he answered slowly, "I s'pose not, only — I reckon that it was the boy who made him fight, eh?"

"I dunno what it was, but he fought all right 'cordin' to what the girl says," answered the officer.

Nat turned away.

"You can have him soon 's the inquest's over," the officer called after him.

That was not until next morning. In the meanwhile Nat neither telegraphed nor wrote. There did n't seem to be anything to say or anything more to be done until he stood face to face with Julia. Then — well, there would n't be very much to say

even then. He did n't see that this new development made any difference. If the man were still living — It was well for 'Gene that he was not living. Dead, every fact was unalterably fixed for all eternity. Nothing could change them. No redress was possible. It was all over — ended. This seemed all the more reason for not disturbing the dreams of the living.

On the train back to St. Croix, Nat reviewed the evidence; there was the mother of the boy who confessed that she knew 'Gene; there was the fact that she had given 'Gene's name to her son; there was 'Gene's peculiar conduct at the funeral and afterwards; there was the physical resemblance which was more than striking; there were 'Gene's last words and his last request. There was no escape from the conclusion.

Nat found that the news had preceded him to St. Croix. The villagers stood about in groups and watched him with curious interest as he strode past them. He made his arrangements with the local undertaker and hurried on to the home of Silas Moulton. The latter met him at the door.

"It's all true?" Silas demanded.

"Yes," answered Nat.

"Then he's dead — gone?"

"Yes," answered Nat.



"Thank God," exclaimed the father of Julie Moulton.

He drew out his handkerchief and wiped his hands, as though he had rid himself of an unclean thing.

"Does Julie know?" asked Nat.

"She knows the man's dead," answered Silas grimly. "That's all — so far. I've kept the papers away from her."

"Good," nodded Nat.

Then he placed his hand upon the shoulder of the older man.

"Silas," he said quietly, "Julie must never know more 'n she knows now. 'Gene's dead — that's enough."

"It's time she knew the sort of man he was," snorted Moulton.

"What for?" asked Nat.

"What for? 'Cause she ought to know the truth."

"Ye don't want to kill her, do ye?" answered Nat. "She's lost him, and that's enough. What he was to you and me and the rest of the people does n't make any difference about what he was to her. She's still got that. Now, if ye kill that, ye kill all that's left. What good would it do, now that he's out of the way?"

"If I was you, I'd have a talk with her and see," answered Silas. "She's upstairs with her mother waiting for you. I'll send her down."

When Julie came into the room, she walked towards Nat with her hand outstretched. She was very pale but quite calm. There were no tears in her eyes and her voice was steady.

"I'm glad you're here, Nat," she said.

He took her hand and held it firmly.

"Your father said he told you," he began. "And — I'm sorry for ye, Julie."

In a voice that was not her own, in a voice cold and level and bitter, she answered him:

"Why are you sorry for me, Nat?"

Her question confused him. He found no meaning in it. Still, in his desire to bring her comfort, still her guardian, he stumbled on as best he could.

"He's dead," Nat said dully. "'Gene's dead."

"I know," she answered, still speaking in that level voice. "I — I've seen the papers."

He started at this and looked away from her.

"Then ye know that he fought his best," he stumbled on.

She shuddered.

"I know everything," she answered. "I know the whole miserable story."

"It — it looks to me like an accident," he went on. "It was n't like 'Gene. If ye 'd seen him these last months as I've seen him, then ye'd know how strange it is. Seems like he was another man ever since he came into camp."

"I know," she nodded.

"All through the week he worked as hard as any of them, and when Saturday came, he — he allers wanted to get home. He —"

She stepped a little way back from Nat. She spoke as one who has long rehearsed the speech to herself.

"Nat," she said, "you need n't make up any more stories. It's over now. And, after all, this end does n't count for any more than it is the end. I knew long before that."

"Knew what?" he gasped.

"I knew that the good in him was the good in you — that there was no other good in him," she answered slowly.

He met her eyes, but he could n't face them long. She checked the speech that was upon his lips with a wave of her hand.

"I knew long ago that he came home because you made him come home," she ran on. "And the little presents — they pleased me at first, but, oh, it was all such a pitiful farce."

Her lips began to tremble, but she took a fresh grip on herself.

"You did your best, Nat. You've been good, Nat — always you've been good to me. And now that it's ended — I want to thank you."

"Ended?" he repeated with a new light in his eyes.

"I don't wish to be unkind to 'Gene now. And all you did helped a lot because at first I did believe. The presents — those made me believe most of all. I should have said before we were married that it was just the sort of thing he — he would do. But I should have known better, and after a while I did know better."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"Don't pity me," she cried. "I've lost nothing — there."

"Then —" He trembled, stepping towards her.

But she put out her hand to check him, her head bowed in shame.

"Nothing there — but everywhere else, everything."

As though with one last final effort, she roused herself. She lifted her head and forced a smile.

"I've lost my youth, Nat. I'm an old woman now."

"Julie! Julie!" he cried. "Then I'll make ye

young again. Come with me — come back to the house that's been waitin' for ye."

Though she resisted, he took her in his arms; though she sobbed a protest, he would not listen. So for a moment she suffered her head to rest on his shoulder. But even in that moment the mock years that burdened her shoulders disappeared and were as though they had never been. Nat was talking softly to her — gentle nothings that were like caresses. It would have been very easy for her to have rested there forever. But gently, sadly, she freed herself from his strong arms.

"I must n't," she whispered.

"Must n't what?" he asked in astonishment.

"You don't understand," she ran on excitedly. "Once you — you offered me your best when I had my best to give you. And I would n't take it. I was blind. I was blind and stupid, thinking I saw that best somewhere else. And I was selfish. And all the while I wanted just you. Only because I was blind I could n't see that it was you."

He made a motion as though to take her again, but she drew away.

"You must listen," she insisted. "I want to tell you this. Oh, it's a shameful thing to say, but it's true, that I saw in him all that was really in you. I learned afterwards — in a single day I

learned. Then those long months afterwards — when you sent him back to me. Once I saw you out there in the snow and — and I almost ran out and closed the door behind me. But I had to stay. You see — you punished me, after all.”

“Julie,” he cried hoarsely.

“Yes, though I hurt you, you hurt me too. I’m glad of that. I — I could n’t live if I did n’t have those hours of torture to remember — between Saturday night and Monday morning.”

“God forgive me,” he choked.

“These things I knew before I admitted them to myself. I — I tried to be as good a wife as I could to him. But he — he was only a visitor in the house, Nat.”

She turned away her head.

“He — he lived in my room, and I — I lived with mother. But in every other way I tried. Then one day he told me the truth himself. He — he said it was n’t he that I loved. Then I came over to your house, and after that — there was no use even pretending.”

“I don’t want to hear any more,” he broke in.  
“It does n’t make any difference.”

“But it *does*, Nat,” she insisted. “I can’t come to you now. I —”

But he took her in his strong arms and gently

pressed back her head so that he could look fair into her dark eyes.

"Julie," he finished for her, "if ye can't come to me, then all I can do is to take ye by main force."

"Nat, Nat," she cried, "you don't understand."

"Yes," he answered, "I reckon I understand now."

Still she struggled. But he did n't say any more. He patted her gently as he might soothe a startled fawn with a murmured —

"So. So."

Then, after a moment, she did n't struggle any more.





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